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THE CROOKED THREE; or, The Black Hearts of the Guadalupe.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM"—Major Sam S. Hall,

AUTHOR OF "DIAMOND DICK," "THE LONE STAR GAMBLER," "THE TERRIBLE TONKAWAY," "KIT CARSON, JR.," "BIG FOOT WALLACE," ETC.



FOOT TO FOOT, FACE TO FACE, AND STEEL TO STEEL.

The Crooked Three;

OR,

The Black Hearts of the Guadalupe.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM,"

(Major Sam S. Hall),

AUTHOR OF "KIT CARSON, JR.," "WILD WILL,"
"BIG FOOT WALLACE," "ROUGH
RIDERS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

STABBING IN THE DARK.

FIVE and twenty years ago there was not a more beautiful mansion on the Rio Guadalupe, Texas, than the home of Colonel Maurice Montague.

Situated but a few miles up the river from the town of Victoria, which was a flourishing village, even at the time of which we write, the plantation was within easy access of the main wagon-road, which extended from Indianola to San Antonio—the great thoroughfare from the Mexican Gulf to the Alamo City.

As the merchandise-trains generally returned empty to Indianola, Lavaca, Matagorda, and other ports, the towns along the road could transport their corn, cotton, and other products at a low rate; consequently the thriving plantation of Colonel Montague was exceedingly well situated in this respect.

The mansion was on the west side of the river, on the verge of the bottom timber, amid oak openings, the trees beautifully festooned with drooping Spanish moss, while the most gorgeous vines and creepers interlaced the branches.

The house was built in the prevailing Southern style, except that it was a frame building, instead of the usual structure of logs; the materials having been brought from New Orleans. It was richly furnished, for the time and place, a piano—the first ever brought to Victoria—being in the parlor.

A bend of horseshoe form, in the Rio Guadalupe, enabled Colonel Montague to erect his dwelling in such a manner as to have it back and front to the stream; the whole bend being one vast garden of tropical fruits and flowers.

The negro cabins were erected in a straight line across the open heel of the horseshoe bend, forming, as it were, an inclosure which was an effective bar against intrusion from the direction of the great wagon-trail, some five miles south.

The dwelling was on the west side of the bend, and fronting toward the east; there being several acres of gardens and orchards between it and the eastern edge of the bottom-timber.

A circular drive extended around the gardens on the border of the timber, and passing directly in front of the mansion, from the wide, vine-covered veranda of which one could gain a most beautiful view of the bend; the gardens being almost encircled by towering trees, while the long row of whitewashed cabins to the south added to the prospect, suggesting plenty and luxury—as did, in fact, all that met the eye in and around the plantation.

Beyond the slave-quarters, east and west, up and down the river, stretched vast fields of snowy cotton and golden corn; some of these fields at a distance being filled with towering oaks, that had been girdled and now stood dead and bare of foliage, a proof that the outer fields had been but recently "broken" for tillage.

Colonel Montague, although an old Texan, had been but five years a resident on the Guadalupe at the time our narrative opens.

He had, like many others who had been engaged in the Mexican war, settled on the territory that had been thus gained. His former home had been on the lower portion of the Colorado, where he had owned a much larger plantation and four times the number of slaves; but, being addicted to cards and drinking, he had lost much of his property, and rather than remain on the Colorado in comparatively cramped circumstances, he had "pulled out" for the Guadalupe, where land was cheaper, and where with what property he still owned, he could hold his head high above his neighbors in that less-developed section.

The colonel had married a very beautiful Castilian lady upon settling on the Colorado; but she had died just previous to his removal, leaving him but one child, a daughter, Marietta by name—as had been that of her mother.

This girl was eleven years of age at the time of their removal to the Rio Guadalupe, and sixteen at the opening of our story.

The only one left upon whom the colonel could lavish his affection, Marietta Montague was one who seemed created to be loved; for she was not only beautiful in form and face, but lovely in character and disposition.

She was of medium height, and with all the grace inherited from her Castilian mother.

Her hair was long, black, and glossy, and her eyes, large, melting, and most expressive. Her complexion, had she complied with the custom of

her mother's family and kept within doors during the reign of old Sol, would have been extremely fair; but, wild and free in spirits and habits, Marietta roamed at will over plain, and through woodland; she having a fiery "pinto," or many-colored pony, which she prized above aught else.

She was, in short, here and there and everywhere, flitting from one place to another, as a bee from flower to flower; and she was almost worshiped by the slaves, as indeed she was by all who came within the influence of her charming and magnetic manners.

Colonel Montague, when he migrated from the Colorado, cut himself off from all his former associates, not even revealing the point of his intended location. He started with his wagon-train in the night-time, for he had taken a vow to never again indulge to excess in drink or to play at cards; and he resolved, in order to the more easily keep this vow, to refrain from associating with men who were addicted to either.

However, although the colonel never again expected to see those who had been his companions in debauchery when on the Colorado, there was one of his old mates, who had sworn never to lose knowledge of him, or let slip an opportunity to further strip him of his worldly possessions—this oath having been taken through a thirst for revenge—the strongest passion in his nature.

This man, James Wickford by name, had at a certain time won a large sum of money from the colonel, when the latter was drinking heavily. Upon being called upon by the winner to settle—notes being presented which Montague did not remember having signed—the old soldier asserted most emphatically that Jim Wickford was a liar, a cheat, and a coward, to thus treat a man insane with liquor. The colonel paid the money, however; but Wickford demanded satisfaction for the insults offered, and a hostile meeting followed. Wickford's right arm was shattered, and he suffered amputation; thus ending his card-playing for life.

Hence his terrible oath of vengeance, and there was not a more vengeful man on the Colorado.

With this view he educated his only child—a son—instilling into the boy's heart the hatred that ruled himself. The son, William Wickford, was taught by his father all the secrets of card-playing, and forced to practice each day with his revolver; the father, blinded by revenge, losing sight of the fact that he was ruining his son, in thus training him for a desperado.

At the time the colonel left the Colorado, Will Wickford was but fifteen years of age.

The senior Wickford had not then formed any regular plan of operations, but had resolved to bend the whole nature of the boy to his will, and to engender a hatred for Montague in the youth's mind as strong as was his own.

Not only did he thus, after deliberation, resolve to ruin his antagonist in the duel, but to profit through his revenge—in fact, to win the money and estates of Montague, and himself and son enjoy the same.

It was some years after the disappearance of Colonel Montague from the Colorado, before his enemy discovered that he was established on the Guadalupe, and there prospering.

It maddened Wickford greatly to learn that his old foe had abstained from drink and gaming all those years, but he finally concluded that this promised him more satisfactory revenge. He had been a "crooked card-sharp" in New Orleans, previous to making Texas his home; and had had a most unscrupulous pard, while in the Crescent City.

This man, Hank Hodge—his *alias* at that time—he sent for, to join him in a plot to ruin the colonel, promising Hodge a heavy reward for his services.

Being in possession of a secret, which, should he disclose the same, would be the means of incarcerating Hank in prison for life, Wickford had no doubts in regard to being able to secure his old pard for the object in view.

And he was right; for Hodge, soon after, put in an appearance on the Colorado, and the elder and younger Wickford made a compact with him immediately.

There had been reasons for delaying the consummation of the sworn revenge of the badly-maimed duelist.

First, he did not wish to make an attempt, until sure of success; and his son was not of an age to hold command of himself.

Secondly, he wished the youth to finish his studies; and, thirdly, he was anxious for Colonel Montague to increase his wealth, in whatever place he had located, in order that the blow would fall more heavily upon him.

No sooner, however, did the revengeful gamester bring to the front his long nursed, and increased longing for revenge, and realize that his son was now old enough to assist—besides having his old pard on hand—than he became furious with himself for his long delay.

Much time was lost before the trio had formed their plans. The elder Wickford well knew the man whom he proposed to ruin, and that he had a very hazardous game to play.

Montague was a man who could not be fooled with to any extent, without great risk, for he

would kill any man who insulted or wronged him, with as little compunction as he would feel in crushing the head of a snake.

Conscious of this, and being well aware that it was possible for his plan to fall through, and he himself be slain, he resolved that even death should not rob him of his revenge.

To insure this, and prevent his son from losing sight of the main object of his father's life, the senior Wickford made his last will and testament, bequeathing to his son an allowance of but one thousand dollars a year, until the boy should have accomplished the ruin and death of Montague. Then the whole estate of his father was to be his.

This will was left in the hands of an attorney who had been disbarred, and who was an old friend of Wickford's; this man being instructed, under oath of silence, and bound by an oath to carry out the wishes of the elder Wickford to the letter—Hank Hodges being also in the secret.

Thus matters were arranged, forcing Will Wickford to be a criminal—to work out, to the letter, the revenge of his father, as instructed, or else be debarred from enjoying the wealth that was rightfully his own at his father's death.

However, Will, at the time, did not give the document a thought; although he knew its contents, he had not the remotest idea that his father would lose his life, or that the will would ever be made use of.

Indeed, notwithstanding the distrust of his own son, disclosed by the drawing up of this instrument, there was not the remotest idea in the son's mind of ceasing to work out the revenge of his parent. This had been so instilled into his mind, as to become a second nature.

The plot of the trio, which was intended to ruin Colonel Montague, and afterward to end his earthly career, will be revealed as the tale progresses.

CHAPTER II.

IN COUNCIL.

MUCH more time was lost in gaining a thorough knowledge of the surroundings of the colonel, and the exact situation of the plantation; but, one week after the trio of conspirators had arranged their plans, found them at Indianola, where they took rooms at the Casimir House, fronting on Matagorda Bay.

Without delay, Will Wickford wrote a letter, at his father's dictation, which, it was believed, would, without doubt, cause their intended victim to hasten to Indianola, as fast as a good horse would bring him.

The departure of the stage to San Antonio, via Victoria, on the morning of their arrival, was favorable to their plans; they having ample time to pen a letter, and get the same into the mail, before the departure of the coach.

The epistle ran as follows:

"CASIMIR HOUSE, INDIANOLA, }
"July 15th, 185-."

"COLONEL MAURICE MONTAGUE, Victoria, Texas—"

"DEAR SIR:—Having just arrived on the steamer Matagorda, from New Orleans, and learning that you are the most influential man in the cotton district of the Guadalupe, I drop you a line, being confident that we can be of mutual benefit to each other."

"I wish to make large purchases of cotton, and stand ready to pay cash; in fact I intend to run against the commission men, and my desire is to form a partnership with you, if agreeable, in the business, or at least to engage you to act as my purchasing agent."

"As I find it impossible to go to you at present, I would consider it a great favor if you would meet me here at your earliest convenience."

"Very respectfully and truly yours,
"WYMAN WALES."

This letter was immediately sealed, addressed, and mailed. Then, after a hearty breakfast, the three conspirators again met, in the room of the Wickfords.

"When will the old cuss git that letter?" inquired Hank, as he ignited a cigar.

"To-night," replied the elder Wickford; "and I'd be willing to bet quite a sum that he starts to-morrow morning, bright and early."

"Now you suit me, Jim Wickford," returned Hank, pulling out a handful of gold as he spoke; "here, Will, I'm betting a couple of hundred that the old coon bites slow—that he doesn't turn up inside of forty-eight hours. Hold the stakes! Jim, old pard, cover the 'ora'!"

"That I'll do, Hank; and win your money! He'll bite at anything that promises gain. Of that I'm certain. I know him, clear through."

"But, by the way, don't use the name of Wickford around here. We are Wales—father and son. But, as for you, Hank, there is no necessity for assuming another cognomen, although you have sailed under many. By the way, I have never mentioned that I shall include the daughter in my revenge. She must be now some sixteen years of age, and is an only child."

"After we have reduced old Montague to poverty, then, I swear I'll deprive him of his daughter—his one comfort in life! He must not die. He shall live, until he has drained the cup that I shall place to his lips!"

"Why not work the game in another way?" suggested Hank. "Let the old cuss hold his

wealth, steal the gal, and marry Will to her. After that, you can wipe the old man out of existence, in any way that you choose."

"I'm not to be disposed of in that way!" exclaimed Will Wickford, indignantly. "Do you think I would link my life with the spawn of that reptile—my father's greatest enemy?"

"That's a true Wickford that speaks!" burst out the elder, with pride. "Rather than my son should wed with a Montague, I'd blow his brains out with my own hand! They are snakes, that must be crushed under the heels of the Wickfords!"

"Well," said Hank, composedly, "there's no call to distribute the extra bile through your systems, until there's some occasion. Having been induced to mix myself in this business, I feel in duty bound to look at it in all its bearings. You both agree that there is a heap of danger in the old man, that, if he tumbles to our little game, he'll bore some one of us, if not more, if we don't 'keep the drop.'"

"This gal biz would lessen the danger to all concerned. There needn't be no legal marriage. You can make her your slave, degrade and humiliate her, torturing the old man through her in that way. Or, as Will wouldn't be recognized after all these years, he might go in and marry her as Will Wales, and then, when he gets control of the property, let her know who he is."

"That would be revenge; only the old cuss might take a notion to shoot his son-in-law. Is the gal pretty? I might cotton to her myself."

Hank was evidently a little bored by the want of excitement so far, and was striving to amuse himself. He perceived, however, by the fire in the eyes of the Wickfords, that there was a suppressed fury in both, which it would not be well to excite.

Hank was a most powerfully-built man, in full flesh, and of a disagreeable and oily appearance in speech, look and manner, proving at a glance that he had arrived at that age when to cater to the wants of his stomach was his principal pleasure, although there were moments when thoughts occurred to him which caused his eyes to blaze and flash, indicating a sleeping volcano of murderous passion.

He was above the ordinary height, with a round, large head, bloated face, and giving one the idea, at first, that he was a common "bruiser." His eyes were a dull, dark hazel, and his hair was cropped short.

Just the opposite were both the Wickfords, being spare in flesh and slightly taller than Hank.

Both had piercing black eyes, black hair and swarthy complexions, showing unmistakable signs of Creole descent. The elder wore full whiskers and short hair; the younger had his hair long and sported a slight mustache and imperial.

For a short time after the last speech of Hank, the father and son remained silent, both pacing back and forth, evidently in deep thought.

There could be no mistaking the feelings that ruled the natures of each, both being vicious, combative and wolfish. The son had naturally slipped into the groove prepared by his sire, his mind craving some such feelings as revenge engendered.

At length James Wickford turned quickly, and, speaking with intense excitement, exclaimed:

"Hank, old pard, you're a brick! Two heads are better than one, and three better still. I never would have thought of what you propose. You shall have the girl, and before the old man dies he shall know that his only child is your victim. She'll not be your first, by a long shot!"

"By the way, I remember having heard that a very pretty young lady, from New Orleans, once left that city on an up-river boat in your company and fell overboard during the night. How was that, Hank? Did you assist her to an over-dose of Mississippi water?"

The effect of Wickford's words upon Hank was most astounding. His bloated face became bloodless, the pallor of death, his eyes glared in horror from beneath his overhanging brows, which contorted most hideously.

He bent forward in his chair, clutching at his throat; his breath came in gasps, his mouth opened, allowing his cigar to fall to the floor, while his gaze was fixed in a strong stare upon the opposite wall of the room, as if he had there pictured to him some fearful scene.

Thus he sat, utterly oblivious, it seemed, to his real surroundings.

This, for a moment; then, with a convulsive shudder, he thrust his fingers into his ears, as if sounds, as horrible as the sights presented to his imagination, rung on the air.

Will Wickford sprang to the table, poured a glass of brandy from a decanter, and held it to Hank's lips.

With a powerful effort, the man now seemed to throw off the terrors that had ruled him.

"What is the trouble with you, Hank?" asked the younger man, with as much solicitude as he was capable of manifesting.

"Old pard, what's come over you so sudden?"

inquired the elder, hastening across the room to his side, and feigning great anxiety.

Hank glanced from one to the other of his questioners quickly, but neither of them betrayed his thoughts; he then answered, slowly, and with seeming difficulty:

"Pards, I don't know. I believe I've got the heart disease. Sudden pains strike me at times, and paralyze me for the moment."

"If I had anything of the kind," remarked James Wickford, "I'd go and drown myself."

Hank darted a suspicious look at the speaker, but his countenance betrayed nothing.

The Wickfords each helped himself to a glass of brandy, and then to cigars, resuming their walk up and down the apartment.

At length, wishing to divert Hank's thoughts, the elder of the two again spoke:

"Hank, get your brain to work; and you also, Will. We must bear in mind that nothing can be accomplished, unless we succeed in getting Montague under the influence of liquor. Now, how is this to be worked? He has drank nothing for a long time—a number of years, I understand—and it won't take much to knock him off his balance; but the question is: how are we to persuade him to take his first drink? That is, for you two; for I must not show my face, as he will at once recognize me, or at all events be suspicious, from my having but one arm."

Eagerly Hank listened, and with increased interest, evidently striving with all his power to concentrate his thoughts upon the subject in hand, and banish those which had so tortured him.

"Is there not a small creek," he at length asked, "not far from this town inland? And does not the wagon-road, that Montague is obliged to follow, cross this creek?"

"Yes," replied Will, quickly; "Chocolate Creek."

"Is there any timber? You know we came up the beach, and can't tell in regard to the nature of the ground any distance from the bay."

"There is a border of mesquites, here and there, on either side, I believe," said the elder Wickford. "But what has that to do with the subject in hand?"

"Much," returned Hank. "I will lay for the colonel, secreting myself in the bush; when he comes along, I'll give his horse such a fright as will send the old man flying to the earth; and then, to revive him, I'll dose him with fourth-proof brandy. I'll pretend that I found him lying on the trail."

"That'll be a good introduction. I'm a cotton-speculator from New Orleans. Came on last steamer, with one Wales. He'll tumble, never fear, and I'll have his skin full of brandy before we reach Indianola."

Both the Wickfords grasped the hands of Hank, their faces showing the relief and pleasure that was expressed in their words.

"Hank, you're a pressed brick!" averred James Wickford. "Here, I've been puzzling my brain ever since that letter was mailed, trying to make up a plan to get the old coon to take his first drink, and you have solved the difficult problem at once, and without a moment's thought or reasoning. Your scheme is admirable, and must succeed!"

"You are right, father," agreed Will. "Hank's plan is the only one to succeed, and he is a first-class strategist every way. It fills the programme to a dot!"

CHAPTER III.

IN THE PATH OF DANGER.

ON the afternoon of the same day that the three plotters were at work in Indianola, Colonel Montague was seated in a roomy rocking-chair on the veranda of his mansion, smoking his Habana placidly, as he gazed out over the beautiful gardens and orchards that he called his own.

He was the picture of cool comfort on this sultry July day; his surroundings all truly typically Southern, and himself a fine specimen of the old-time Southern gentleman.

Nothing could be brought forward to prove his strength of will more forcibly than the fact that, notwithstanding the customs of the place and time, he had for five years kept his vow of total abstinence, resolving that no more of his property should be risked at cards, or lost in any way in the mad whirl of dissipation to men who, as they pocketed his gold, laughed and sneered privately at his folly and verandancy.

A fine, handsome man he still was, and every inch the true soldier; nothing but firm and healthy flesh and bone, the fire of his eye being undimmed, and his face actually with a more youthful appearance than when he left the Colorado.

Since then, Colonel Montague had lived entirely for his daughter; her present and future comfort and happiness being ever uppermost in his mind, and his whole soul wrapped up in the lovely girl, who tripped lightly around the garden-paths, singing merrily, or dashed around the drive on her "pinto" pony.

The colonel had gradually enlarged the cultivated portion of his plantation, increasing his

crops each season, hoping that, ere death laid its icy hand upon him, to be equally as well off in this world's goods as he ever had been in the old days on the Rio Colorado.

At times his thoughts would revert to his former associates, and he would speculate as to whether they yet lived; and he quite often thought of James Wickford with regret, as he pictured his old enemy with but one arm. Much he regretted his encounter with him, although he well knew that Wickford merited a more severe punishment, as the latter had cheated him out of more than fifty thousand dollars at cards in what was termed "gentlemanly" games.

Since he had come to the Guadalupe he had learned something of Wickford's life previous to his arrival in Texas; and that in place of his having been a Louisiana planter, as he represented himself, he had been a well-known gambler in the Crescent City.

Often, too, did the colonel think of the oath that Wickford had sworn—to have a terrible revenge for the loss of his arm—but he never dreamed for a moment that his old enemy would seek to keep that oath, or follow him up to the Guadalupe, especially as he would now be an unequal antagonist.

Not for a moment did Montague harbor the thought that Wickford would stoop to low and ruffianly means to seek his revenge; the only avenue by which gentlemen resented injury or insult being the *duello*.

That Wickford had a son, the colonel had entirely forgotten; hence he was at a loss to conjecture how or by what means his sworn foe was now to get even with him.

As years passed, however, Montague banished all thoughts of Wickford from his mind, except at long intervals, when his heart was filled with regret at having maimed his opponent for life.

Perhaps this regret was caused as much from the fact that, through Wickford's detected villainy, he himself had been led to reform; and that, through that reform, he had enjoyed a happiness greater than any he had experienced since the death of his wife.

Had Colonel Montague known of the scheme that was even now being laid, and that so cunningly was the plot formed he could not even suspect it, he would not have smoked so placidly and contentedly.

He had in a great measure recovered from the afflictions that had fallen upon him, and each of them had been the means of influencing him to become a better man—to be the man he now was. For years his sky had been clear and sunny; but black clouds were now looming above his horizon, which would darken his life and try his soul to the utmost.

Unconscious of this, however, Colonel Montague threw the stump of his cigar into the shrubbery, and his own weighty form into a Mexican hammock that was stretched across the veranda. He then closed his eyes for a *siesta*, his last thoughts being of Marietta, who had taken a book and gone down the river-bank, as he presumed, to read by herself for a couple of hours.

When Colonel Montague first seated himself on the veranda, after having dined, his pretty daughter kissed him fondly, and tripped away, caroling one of her favorite songs, as she passed down one of the many flower-fringed garden-paths.

Around the north side of the dwelling she went, forgetting not to call out joyously, in salutation to old Aunt Huldry, the cook; who stood, filling up completely the doorway of her culinary cabin with her generous proportions. Marietta heard faintly, as she ran toward, and entered the bottom-timber, the deep-meaning and sincere, "De good Lor' bress dat chile!" that came from the lips and heart of the old slave.

In a moment's time the young girl had darted through a line of undergrowth that bordered a small "open" in the timber; within which the pony, Pinto by name, as well as by nature, was staked.

The animal gave out a whinny of welcome and delight, advancing the length of its rope to meet its young mistress, who came up, and patted its muzzle affectionately. A moment thus, and then from the border of the thicket in the cool shade the fair girl produced several ears of green corn, which she "shucked" dexterously, and fed to the pony.

This done, she saddled and bridled her pet, mounted, and away they went through the timber, winding here and there around the thickets, and toward the ford, in the cool shades.

The maiden was enchantingly beautiful, a perfect wood-nymph; her cheeks rosy-red, and just sufficiently tanned to enhance her beauty. Her long, wavy, dark hair, but partially confined by a fillet of pink and gold ribbon, and crowned by a Gypsy-like hat, flew wild at her back.

Her gold-headed riding-whip seemed a useless article, as her pony appeared as full of life and vivacity as herself. In fact, the animal seemed proud of its silver-mounted saddle and bridle, and prouder still of the fairy maiden, who was but a light burden.

Laughing, singing, and talking to Pinto, the young girl dashed on, with loose rein, until near the steep bank which led down to the waters of the beautiful Gaudalupe. Here, without a touch of rein, the pony checked his speed, and proceeded down into the ford; appearing to know the wishes of his mistress, as she had not once made a movement to guide him, since leaving the "open."

Soon the hoofs of Pinto splashed into the clear waters, and Marietta, with peals of merry laughter, curled up her limbs to avoid getting them wet; the waters in the deepest part, at this dry portion of the season, however, barely reaching to the pony's saddle-girth. Pinto appeared to take delight in raising his hoofs clear of the stream, and plunging them down violently, sending a shower of spray up over his fair rider, who seemed to enjoy it hugely.

No more beautiful picture could be well imagined, than was presented, when Marietta Montague reached the middle of the stream, and the bright southern sun blazed down upon the pair, transforming the pearly drops of water that flew about the head of the fair girl; into blazing fiery gems; the snow-white, even teeth of Marietta showing, as she laughed, between her perfectly formed lips.

And this thought, a young man, who sat his horse, screened by the undergrowth, on the opposite bank of the river, his eyes fixed upon the unexpected sight that met his gaze, fully realized, in his most intense admiration.

This young man apparently was about twenty-two years of age, and was a perfect specimen of manhood in every respect—Apollo-like in form and face, and winning in expression.

He had dark-blue eyes, Grecian nose, and a complexion naturally fair, but bronzed by the sun; long, wavy hair, dark-brown in color, and a face that was almost femininely handsome in feature—these were the characteristics of the stranger.

He was clad in black silk velvet, of Mexican make, the breeches slashed, and bedecked with buttons on the outer seams. A black sombrero, and dark woolen shirt—the latter richly embroidered, and loosely confined at his shapely neck by a black silken kerchief—high-topped boots of fine workmanship, upon the heels of which were golden spurs: thus was he attired.

He was armed with Colt's revolvers and a bowie at his belt, and a Sharp's rifle at his saddle-horn. His horse was a noble-looking black half-breed, showing strong points for speed and endurance, and his equipments were of the best and most highly ornamented kind that could be purchased on the Rio Grande.

The glance of eye, poise of form, and cast of countenance, all proved him a man of daring deeds, of impulsive action, and kind heart; in fact, one of nature's noblemen—an honest man.

Had one glanced from the youth to the maiden in the stream, he could not have avoided the thought, that they would make a most lovely pair.

That each was born to high station, and that both were handsomer and more striking in appearance than could be met with in years of travel at home and abroad.

Fate seemed to be drawing toward each other, two splendid specimens of the human race; their meeting seeming to be the signal that was to change the heretofore quiet life of one of them, at the least, into deepest misery.

The horseman sat his steed, as if spellbound at the lovely sight; gazing, without being himself discovered, until Marietta had disappeared up the dug-out trail, from the ford, some distance lower down than his station.

Then he turned his horse about and urged the animal in the direction of the northern and outer edge of the timber, in order to gain another view of the lovely maiden; he judging that she intended galloping over the north plain.

And he was correct in his decision; for as he gained a position on the border of the undergrowth, he saw Marietta skimming over the prairie northward like a swallow, on the "pinto," the hoofs of the little animal glittering in the sunlight as they flew over the grass and flowers.

For one moment the stranger gazed at the fast-flying maiden; his face was quickly turned westward, becoming pallid as death, while he drove spurs home, and his noble black sprung over the prairie in the track of the fleeing maiden. Then from his lips burst the words, in agonized intonation:

"Oh, my God! That angelic girl is doomed! May Heaven give me skill and strength to save her!"

The sight that drew these exclamations from the horseman was indeed most appalling, and one which Marietta did not appear to have discovered. To the west, in a long and irregular line, bounding at headlong speed, in a mad and frantic stampede, were thousands of long-horned cattle; Marietta being directly in the path of the fear-frenzied beasts, who would trample her and her pet pony into the prairie award—crush them out of and beyond all semblance to anything of living form.

CHAPTER IV.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

WHEN Marietta Montague disappeared up the dug-out trail, from the view of the young horseman, she had a clear way to the open plain; while he was forced to wind about and around dense thickets. Consequently the fair girl was some distance out on the prairie before the stranger, who had been so struck by her beauty, reached the border of the timber.

The river curved from the ford toward the north, and the stampede of cattle had dashed around the extreme northern swell of the bottom timber, being, probably, not in view when the fair rider urged her horse out upon the prairie, and without doubt, her attention had bent eastward, or she would have discovered the danger, and turned back.

The young man perceived this, and he also saw that, even should the maiden endeavor to escape her fate by returning on her trail, it would be impossible for her to reach a point distant south enough to avoid the mad herd, while to keep onward was sheer madness. Her one chance was to head away northeast, in the same direction that the cattle were speeding, and even then she would most probably be overtaken in the end.

All this the stranger saw in an instant, and he firmly resolved to brave almost certain death to save the angelic beauty thus threatened.

He had felt, the instant that he beheld the beauty in the river, that he had met his fate—felt a strange yearning to know and speak with her, and had a consciousness that her image was indelibly imprinted upon his heart and brain.

As may be supposed, the latter was now in a wild whirl, in consequence of these emotions; so strange, and so new to him.

Well he knew the dread dangers of a stampede of frantic cattle; far more dangerous, at the time of which we write, than so many buffalo, for the reason that no herders were then employed, and, except at the spring and fall, and marking season, the cattle ran free from any molestation.

The black steed sprung forward, with wild snorts of pain, at the cruelly-driven spurs; but had not made a dozen bounds when Marietta, with a piercing shriek, whirled her pony about, and lashed him in frantic fury, back toward the Guadalupe; she gazing with bated breath and ghastly face at the overwhelming avalanche of terrified brutes, that with fiery eyes and lolling red tongues, shot with fearful speed down toward her; the clashing of their long, sharp, glittering horns sounding on the prairie air—the very ground trembling, and a dull rumble, like distant thunder filling her ears.

The poor girl was so terrified, that she was forced to clutch at Pinto's mane and the saddle, to retain her seat, her manner and actions proving that she also realized the dread fate from which she saw no escape.

Only one glance she gave toward the timber, to calculate her chances; and, although she now perceived a horseman galloping toward her like the wind, yet not for an instant did her gaze remain upon his form—a horrible fascination fastening it upon the approaching tide of death! "Oh, Father in Heaven, save me!" burst in pleading prayer from her lips.

"Oh, papa! why did I leave you to-day?"

Not for a moment did Marietta hope for rescue at the hands of the approaching horseman.

Well she knew that he would be but as a feather in the path of that terrible stampede; and she had no idea that he would be foolish enough to place himself within the outer southern track of the herd. But she was greatly mistaken; for, with far-reaching yells of encouragement, on he came, and Marietta was forced again to glance toward her would-be preserver.

The strange equestrian was now close at hand.

"Guide your horse to the left of mine and halt! I will save you, or die with you!"

This he shouted, jerking his horse to a halt not twenty paces in front of her.

Up on the left side of the panting black dashed the terrified Pinto, rejoiced to be with his kind.

"Hold your position firmly! Grasp my bridle-rein, and pray God to assist us, or welcome us home!"

These words Marietta heard as in a dream, and she mechanically clutched the bridle of the stranger's horse; jerking her pony about, to bring the heads of the horses together.

The next moment, the maiden glanced in the direction of the stampede—a wall of frantic brutes, not sixty paces away—and although faint, and sick with terror, she felt braced, by the daring coolness of the handsome stranger, who had come to die with her, in so unlooked-for, and unaccountable a manner.

Then, as she glanced, the heroic young man sprung from his horse to the earth, and a shudder of fearful dread and anguish convulsed the poor girl, though she still strove, with all her power of will, to overcome her faintness, and meet death as bravely as the man who had seemingly sought to throw his life away.

She saw that a number of cartridges hung

from his mouth, and from between his fingers, by the loosened paper ends, and, as he sprung to the ground, his rifle went to his shoulder, exploding the instant after. She saw a gigantic steer turn a complete somersault, then another, and another—yet still, the mad mob of brutes, with fiery eyes, thundered on.

She heard the quick snapping of the lever of the stranger's Sharp's rifle, and the reports that followed—this, until the stampede was almost upon them—those in their direct front stumbling and rolling over the dead carcasses, with fierce bellow, to be trampled upon by the others, that were forced on from the rear.

Then Marietta saw the stranger hurl his rifle to the earth, and the next instant stand with a revolver in each hand, the stampede not twenty yards away!

Yet, still he stood—stood, until Marietta gave a cry of mortal anguish; but, at the same moment that this shriek rent the air, the sharp crack of revolvers broke forth, every bullet entering the brain of one of the maddened monarchs of the prairie.

Soon a barricade of carcasses lay in front, sufficient to part the herd, which now branched to the right and left of the black steed and the pony.

On, like a raging torrent, on either side of the corpse-like maiden, the trembling horses, and the heroic stranger, swept the terrible stampede, shaking the very earth, until at length the last of the frantic brutes had passed, leaving the plain to the west open, and clear of all animate objects of every kind.

Marietta Montague was saved from a horrible fate; but, no sooner did she realize this, than the reaction caused her to sink forward upon the neck of Pinto, in a dead faint, and she would have fallen to the earth, had not her daring preserver rushed to the side of the pony, and caught the fair girl in his arms, while he said, in heartfelt tones:

"Father, I thank Thee for the strength and will, that enabled me to save this Thy child!"

Panting with excitement and exertion, the rescuer mounted his black steed, and, with the senseless form of Marietta in his arms, he proceeded at once to return to the timber. The pony followed after like a dog, keeping close to the heels of the horse; at times tossing his head around, as if fearing danger.

Anxious in regard to the condition of his unconscious charge, evidently unaccustomed to such close companionship with the fair sex, and somewhat ignorant of their natures, the young man urged his horse onward, into and through the timber, to the very point at which he had first discovered the maiden crossing the ford.

Sliding carefully from his saddle, he bore his fair burden down the bed of a small "wash-out," to the water's edge. There he bathed her face, casting copious showers of water over her head; soon having the pleasure and satisfaction of observing signs of returning consciousness.

Satisfied now that his charge would soon recover, he carried her back to the cool shades, and reclined her upon a mossy bank; placing his velvet *jaqueta* beneath her head, as heavy sighs broke from her lips.

The stranger arose to his feet and stood, with folded arms and bared head, gazing with admiration upon the angelic girl whom he had saved from a most fearful death.

Suddenly Marietta opened her eyes in a dazed manner, and then started to a sitting posture, bracing herself by her hands upon the mossy bank. Looking into the face of the young man before her in a bewildered way, she darted glances at the panting animals; Pinto now walking to her side with a whinny of pleasure, as he lowered his head for a caress.

At once the horrors of the near past came up before her, and she cried out:

"Oh, sir! I remember all now. I cannot express in words the thanks I feel for your daring and disinterested service in my behalf. I shall never forget your name in my prayers if you will kindly tell it to me!"

"Do not tax your mind with thoughts of my service to you," returned the stranger. "I am repaid ten thousand times by seeing you alive and unharmed. No true man would have hesitated to attempt what I did; although I must confess I had but little hope of saving you or myself after I had passed the outer line of the stampede. But I do trust this will prove a warning to you, and that you will always inspect the prairie well before venturing upon it."

"My presence here was providential, most certainly. I was at this very spot when you crossed the river. You may imagine the rest. I am no flatterer. We may never meet again—you are to decide that—but, to my dying day, I shall never forget you."

"My name is Harold Holmes. I am recently from the Rio Grande, and am traveling in a free-and-easy way, camping out alone, to see what is to be seen in this new and interesting section of our country."

"May I ask whom I have the honor of forming the acquaintance of in so tragic a manner?"

"Thanks for your confidence and frankness, Mr. Holmes. We must be friends, for I owe my life to you. My father is Colonel Maurice Montague, and his plantation is just beyond the

river. My own name is Marietta Montague. You must return with me, and partake of our hospitality."

"I have heard of Colonel Montague," returned Harold, "and, as you do not seem to have yet entirely recovered from your fright, I will gladly escort you to your home. However, your father may not favor a very intimate acquaintance, and I must say to you, Miss Marietta, that I consider it dangerous for my future peace of mind to linger for any length of time in this vicinity."

As Harold said this, his eyes and those of the young girl met, and in that glance each read that they had met their fate—that their future woe or happiness depended upon each other.

Their glances spoke more plainly than words, although the young man had certainly not beaten around the bush; but, in his straightforward way, betrayed his new born feelings.

Assisting Marietta upon her pony, Harold now sprung upon his horse, and the well-matched pair proceeded slowly to and across the ford, exchanging confidences on the way, Marietta feeling from her heart that this stranger, even did not her affection go out to him, had a right to be considered above her other friends, having saved her life at the risk of his own.

CHAPTER V.

THE VOICE OF THE CHARMER.

UPON reaching the south side of the Guadalupe, Marietta drew rein beneath a giant tree, the branches of which, not ten feet from the ground, were literally covered with drooping moss, shutting out entirely the sunlight.

"Here," said the fair girl, with some hesitancy in voice and manner, "here, Mr. Holmes, is a favorite retreat of mine, where I frequently come to while away an idle hour with my books. It has occurred to me that papa may be still asleep, and also that he is likely to be a little cross until he gets thoroughly awakened."

"Upon seeing me in company with a stranger, he might become excited; and he might not speak and act as he would after fully understanding the circumstances. Would it not then be advisable to rest ourselves and horses for a short time beneath these cool shades?"

"You are very thoughtful, indeed," returned Harold as he alighted, assisting the maiden to do so at the same time. "You have suggested what suits me exactly. I must say I thank you, for I see that you wish to prevent any unpleasant feelings between myself and your father."

"This is a most beautiful spot, a perfect Eden; and I shall always consider it a sacred place—that is, if I should be permitted to enjoy these delightful shades again."

"You speak as though you thought it doubtful. Why is that, may I ask?"

Harold had, by this time secured the horses, and he now seated himself near to Marietta, on one of the projecting roots of the mammoth tree.

Marietta thought, as she looked upon him, that she had never before seen one so handsome and attractive in every way. Her face flushed with pride and pleasure at owing her life to such a man.

"Life is uncertain, Marie—if you will permit me to call you so"—this in reply to her last question—"and this pleasure, following your great peril, is so great, that I fear it cannot last. Besides, I have shot, it seems to me, something like a score of valuable beeves, and the owners might appear, you know, and finding me in this vicinity, decide to lynch me."

"You astonish me!" returned the girl. "I hope there are no men on the Guadalupe so brutal and inconsiderate as to bring you to account for shooting the cattle to save my life."

"Besides, papa will insist upon paying for them, if any such demand is made. Do not again speak of the uncertainty of our again meeting. I don't like to hear it, Mr. Holmes."

"Can you not say, Harold?"

"Well, Harold, then!"

"That is right. Thank you!"

"I have had my own way pretty much, for a long time," said the girl; "and I am impulsive—perhaps selfish, and given to please myself, and to follow my own inclinations too much. From not having any lady friend to advise me, I may seem to be too forward and free-spoken; but I am sincere, and devoid of all hypocrisy. And I believe you are much like me, in this respect."

"Should I never again meet you, I feel that I should be most miserable through life. We have been brought together in a strange manner, and are the best of friends now."

"There, my confession is over now, and I will bear yours; which, by the way, should have come first."

"I have spoken most freely, indeed, as freely and plainly as I dared," said Harold Holmes, rising, and stepping toward the young girl.

Then, kneeling at her feet, and clasping his arms about her, impulsively, he exclaimed:

"Marie, my darling—for I must now call you so—I swear to you, now that we have both been so mercifully preserved from death, that I

love you more than all the world—that no human power shall stand between us and that affection which, I feel, has sprung up spontaneously in our hearts."

"There can be no greater happiness than the privilege of loving and protecting you from all harm and trouble, from this time until God calls me home. I realize that there will be trials and difficulties in our path; but I will sweep them all aside, if you will but promise to love me."

With all the impulse of a child, the answer of Marietta came in a whisper from her lips:

"Yes, Harold, I love you, and shall as long as life is given me. You saved my life, and I belong to you. None shall dispute the fact, and none shall ever part us."

Springing to his feet, Harold clasped the maiden to his breast, and for several moments stood thus, the eyes of each gazing into those of the other, and each reading the other to the very soul.

Never was there a better matched couple, a lovelier, more angelic maiden, a handsomer, nobler and braver man, than were thus clasped beneath the slowly swaying mosses, which, contrasted with the glorious sunlight without, seemed ominous of dark days to come—days of despair and anguish as deep and intense as was the happiness of the new-born love that ruled both our hero and heroine.

Their love was as warm and bright as the sunshine beyond the timber. Was their future to be filled with as contrasting misery and anguish and dark despair as the dense, impenetrable shades seemed now to typify? Time will prove as we progress.

This is a world of commingled joy and sorrow, sunshine and clouds, pain and anguish, calm and storm, and few there are so favored as not to experience more of the darkness than the sunlight.

"Oh, Harold!" said the young girl at length, "I must go home at once. The excitement of the afternoon, which seems ages of time, has overtaken my brain. I shall be myself in a short time."

"Will you excuse me until I ascertain if papa is awake? Indeed, I know he must have finished his nap long since. What would he think should he see us here? I tremble to think of such a possibility. He would be furious."

"Nothing that we could say in explanation would be an excuse in his eyes."

"Remember," said the young man, "that nothing must part us, except for short intervals. I have been very inconsiderate thus to excite and detain you."

"Return to your home at once and recover yourself. Upon reflection, I have decided not to call upon your father to-day. Perhaps I shall do so to-morrow, after he has fully considered the event of to-day. But, believe me, were it not that I wish to be a welcome guest in your father's house, in order that I may meet you, I would not for the world have you mention the circumstances under which our acquaintance was formed."

"It seems like making service the price of your friendship, and that of your father. Adios until to-morrow at this time, when I shall look forward to meeting you here."

"Oh, Harold!" exclaimed Marie, "I am so agitated that I know not what to do. You ought to accompany me at once to my home, but I suppose you know best. Do not fail to-morrow to meet me. But, tell me, which way do you ride at this late hour in the day?"

"I shall encamp on the other side of the river to-night, in order that I may be near you. Should you wish to see me, blow a blast on the silver horn that I see attached to your saddle, and that I may know the sound, blow it when I am across the stream—which will be in about two minutes—and I will answer by notes on my flute, which you must remember."

Without further words, Harold drove spurs, and his noble black bounded from view amid the timber.

Waiting until she judged that the young man had gained the north bank of the Guadalupe, Marie—to use her name in Harold's curtailed, pet way—raised a small silver horn to her lips, and blew a rippling farewell, which was answered by a very peculiar series of notes upon a flute.

The fair bugler then whirled Pinto about, and allowed the pony to walk slowly toward the little "open."

Never before had the mind of the free and joyous maiden been so filled with emotion; and she found herself wrapped in deep thought, and with little wonder. Few human beings were ever called upon to experience such a sudden transportation from hopeless despair and terror—from the jaws of death to life and safety, and most intense happiness—and all within an hour's time.

Marietta realized that she had, in that short hour, changed from a frolicsome and careless maiden, to a woman—a woman, with the weight upon her of a pure, unselfish love, that bordered upon adoration.

Never, in her wildest dreams, had she pictured a man so faultless, handsome, true and brave, as she had every reason to believe was

Harold Holmes; and she was proud as a queen, glorified by this bursting forth of her maiden love.

Then she recalled many expressions made by her father, and hitherto considered as of no importance; as she had never dreamed of there being occasion for applying them personally to herself.

The colonel had often asserted that no adventurer should ever gain his daughter for a wife, to enjoy his gold; that she should marry no man who was not of high standing and wealth, and who was, besides, well known to him.

These recalled words brought the first gloomy apprehensions; but her lips curled slightly, and her eyes flashed at the thought, expressive of the will and passion she had inherited from her mother.

She had never yet been crossed by her father, and in this, the one grand object of her life, she would also have her own way. She would love Harold Holmes, if all the world turned against her in anger and scorn!

Tossing her head in much the same manner as did her pony, Marietta Montague threw back her long wavy tresses over her shoulder, and arranged her hat and ribbons; then, as Pinto entered his favorite "open," the fair girl sprung lightly to the earth, and blew a call on her bugle.

In a very short time, a little negro, with bright eyes, and scant apparel, burst from the undergrowth, with a dozen ears of green corn, and ran at once to her, taking the pony in charge.

"You are prompt to obey, little Pomp," said his mistress. "Give your best attention to Pinto, and tell Cora to come to me to-morrow, to consult about a more suitable costume for you. Has Colonel Montague made his appearance yet?"

"Mars' curnil, he's a-prancin' up an' down de verander, Miss Mar'etta. Reckon he's kinder flusterated, 'kase ye's done bin gone sich a long time."

With some trepidation and anxiety the young girl, deciding that she had been absent much longer than she had supposed, passed around the north end of the mansion to the presence of her father.

As she reached the veranda, glancing over the gardens toward the timber on the east side of the bend, she knew by the sun-line on the trees that it was growing late, and that eventide approached. She was startled on catching a view of her father pacing the veranda as he held an open letter in his hand. She felt that what she had to reveal to him must be postponed, if she would not change his evident pleasure to anxiety.

The colonel seemed to have lost sight of the fact of her long absence in his pleasure at receiving some good news, for he waved the letter over his head, exclaiming, as his daughter came forward:

"Good news, my darling! I am offered a partnership with a cotton-broker of New Orleans. I shall make good my fallen fortunes. You shall be a rich heiress!"

Tears sprung to the eyes of Marietta.

Never before had she fully known how necessary she was to the very existence of her father; that he lived, and planned, and hoped, and strove but for her—for her who felt herself to be now a deceitful traitor to his life-long affection and trust!

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE TOILS.

"I SLEPT longer than usual, my child," said Colonel Montague, "and was about to go in search of you, when I recollected that the mail-coach from the coast was due this evening. I was a trifle anxious, as I had not received a letter from my New Orleans commission merchant and consequently, I indulged in another cigar. But, indeed, I was quite nervous, my dear, in regard to your long absence."

"You have never yet met with an accident, careless though you are, so I cannot account for the extreme apprehension I had begun to feel on your account. It is the first time that I have been so worried when you were absent."

"But, to my letter! Seat yourself, Marietta, and I will read it to you; for I consider it quite important, and I have no doubt it will open a way for me to clear a large sum of money outside of my plantation income. I shall never be satisfied, as I have often said, until I am as well off as I was in my most prosperous days on the Colorado."

The colonel had by this time escorted his daughter to a chair, and when he had spoken in regard to his strange worry of mind at her long absence, Marietta had been on the point of revealing its cause. But the old gentleman was so elated at the contents of the letter that he did not give his daughter a chance to speak, so the secret slept in her breast untold.

Colonel Montague now read the epistle carefully, it being the same that had been written by Will Wickford at Indianola, and the contents of which are known to the reader.

"Tell me, my child! What do you think of that? Is there not a chance to increase my in-

come, without taxing myself to any extent? I need something more, to occupy my mind, and this opening just suits me. What is your opinion, my darling?"

"Well, really, papa, I am not capable of judging," answered Marietta—absent-minded, so much so that it was strange her father did not observe it—"I do not understand why you should wish to increase your cares, papa dear. We are rich enough now. We have been so happy, and this is such a beautiful home, that I am averse to your making any change in your business affairs; or, indeed, in our usual mode of living."

"Should you accept either of the proposals this Mr. Wales makes, you would be away from home at times, and I should be so lonely without you."

The little selfish hypocrite! Transformed into such within the course of the afternoon, she lost sight of the fact that, but a short time previous, she had confessed to a man whom she had never before seen, that she loved him more than all the world.

Thus it is in this world, however. An acquaintance of a day influences us now and then more strongly than those whom we have known and trusted through life.

The same thoughts which have occurred to us were brought most forcibly to the mind of Marietta, a moment after she had spoken; and she felt abased and ashamed. But the twilight prevented the colonel from noticing any of the emotion so foreign to Marietta, and he replied quickly:

"I do not think that you understand the matter, my child. If I take this proposed step, I can attend to the business principally through correspondence; and I shall not be obliged to absent myself from home for any length of time."

"But I do hope you will have an understanding in that respect, papa, before you enter into any agreement with the party who has written you. Do you know the man, by the way? It seems to me that if he is what he represents, he must be well known, by reputation, on the Colorado."

"You are very prudent, Marietta, I must say. You display more business tact than I have ever given you credit for," replied her father, smiling.

The maiden felt condemned at this remark. She well knew that her recent conduct could not, by any one, be deemed prudent.

Upon reflection, she felt positive that no one would believe that her life had been in such peril; and that it would be said that she could have escaped had she wished. In short, it might be alleged that the whole affair was a previously concocted plan of this stranger, who had determined to form her acquaintance, and who thus sought to create a favorable impression.

The more Marietta thought the subject over, the more resolved she became not to inform her father; and she was now rejoiced that she had not done so, before forming her conclusions as to the manner in which her explanations would be likely to be received.

"I do not know Wyman Wales," continued the colonel, after a brief period of thought; "but his standing can immediately be ascertained, at Indianola, from any of the shippers, or from the mercantile directory."

"Wales will, himself, furnish the capital to his agent; and he asserts that he is about to make a new departure; enabling all to dispose of their cotton for cash, in place of depending upon dilatory commission merchants. But there is no further need of considering the subject. I shall start for Indianola to-morrow morning, bright and early."

"Do you really intend going so soon?" asked his daughter, in well-assumed disapprobation.

"Yes, my child; I must see this Wales, as he requests. There may nothing come of it; but the chances are, as I look upon it, that there is money in it. You can worry through a couple of days, perhaps three—without me."

"What time do you expect to reach Indianola?" was the girl's next question. "You have spoken, several times, of lawless persons. Do you not feel that your life may be in danger on the road?"

The colonel laughed long and loud, after which he answered:

"Have no fears for me, my child. I am an old soldier, and I always go well armed. Besides, the road from Victoria is one vast line of wagon-trains. The man, or men, who would attack me, would get a good dose of lead, in place of gold, for their pains."

"But, good-night, my dear! I must retire. You will probably see me in the morning, as you are an early riser."

"I shall be up early, father; but I regret that you have taken any notice of that letter. I do not know why, but I am suspicious, and shall be very anxious until you return. I hope that none of those Colorado men, whom you have shaken off forever, will be in Indianola."

"They can have no influence upon me, in any event," was the confident rejoinder. "I have drank my last glass of liquor, and shuffled my last cards, as you know. I have not forgotten

what it was that came so near wrecking my life, or so nearly left you a pauper!"

During the latter portion of this conversation between father and daughter, they were standing near to each other; and as Colonel Montague pressed his lips to those of his loved child, had he known what was to occur ere they should again thus meet, he would sooner have lost his right arm, than gone on the proposed journey.

The good-night parting was more demonstrative and lingering, than the meditated short absence called for—even were they not to see each other in the morning—both seeming to feel strangely, yet unable to account for the feeling.

However, both had occasion later on, to decide that the unaccountable and oppressive sensations which ruled them, were the subtle promptings of their nature against a separation, during which both of them must suffer; a premonition of their suffering and danger, although not recognizable as a warning, or a forewarning of the evil to come.

The colonel hastened to his apartment, giving orders that he was to be called at an early hour in the morning. Marietta stood, where her father had left her, for a few moments; and then threw herself upon a chair, and gave herself up to meditation and anticipation.

From the moment that her father had mentioned his intention of leaving for Indianola, a heavy load had been removed from her mind; for, on the morrow, she had appointed to meet Harold Holmes—her love for whom, short-lived as it was, had so changed her, that she felt a relief and joy to know that her father was about to leave her—to go upon a journey, which would take him days to perform. She was beginning to weave a tangled web.

Well did the girl know that, had her parent revealed his intended departure a few hours earlier, she would have been half frantic with grief and apprehension, and would have insisted upon accompanying him. She could not but think it strange too, that he had not himself realized that such would have been the case with his child, had she not become, in some way, greatly changed.

Marietta almost detested herself for having thus become less loving to her father; yet not one iota of her love for Harold, did she wish to cramp, or curtail, in consequence.

The beautiful maiden, so favored, and free, and happy in the morning, was most miserable, from self-condemnation, at night. Yet, at times, she was filled with a happiness that bordered upon actual pain; as her love for her brave preserver surged in, and filled her heart, banishing every other thought and emotion to oblivion.

She had every confidence in Harold. He would meet her, as agreed; and then, they would confer afresh upon the delicate subject, in regard to when and how the colonel should be informed of the stampede, and the changes occasioned in her heart, through the same.

She would explain to the young man, the reasons which had caused her to postpone her revelations to her father; and she believed that her preserver and lover would agree with her that she had acted wisely.

Poor Marietta found herself, as it were, in another world. All her loves, hopes, and aspirations were changed. Pinto was suffering, in consequence of missing the evening visit and caresses of his mistress; who sat, until a late hour, curled up in her father's chair, her eyes fixed upon the pale, silvery moon, and wondering whether the Queen of Night was then casting her soft rays down upon the sleeping form of the one who filled all her waking thoughts—the man who was, the previous night, unknown and undreamed of; but who now was her hope and her life, Harold Holmes!

CHAPTER VII.

THE STRANGER'S MISSION.

AFTER leaving Marietta Montague, the young man allowed his horse to proceed leisurely along the ford trail to the outer edge of the timber; but before he exposed himself and his horse to view, he halted and cast a sweeping glance from the heap of dead cattle back to the point where the mad herd had rushed from beyond the sweep in the bottom timber.

He was startled at seeing, just coming into view at a gallop from beyond the sweep of the line of trees, a dozen mounted men keeping on the trail of the stampede. He perceived that he had halted just in time, and that the prudence he had learned to practice in his wanderings had served him well on this occasion as well as at many previous times.

He well knew that the horsemen were the owners of the stampeding cattle, and were now in pursuit to turn them back toward their usual range.

They would soon come upon a score of their steers shot dead—worth at that time some twelve dollars each. That the stockmen would be furious at their loss, Harold well knew; and they could not be blamed, as they knew nothing of the circumstances.

Even were the matter explained, they would be no less eager for revenge upon the man who

had thus shot down their property. Evidently he was not safe.

But a very short time did Harold maintain his position, when the cattle-men reached the slain animals; and with fists beating the air, and angry ejaculations, walked their horses around the mass of carcasses, some dismounting to examine the bullet-holes and search for a ball that might serve as evidence against the slayer.

Our hero had reason to fear that the rancheros would decide that there had been no occasion for killing the bees; that whoever had been endangered might easily have dashed toward the south and the timber, thus avoiding the cattle.

With this apprehension Harold, wishing to avoid discovery, turned his horse into the undergrowth and proceeded down-stream, intending to encamp at a distance from the scene of his recent startling adventure, which had ended so joyously to him, and which he believed was the turning-point in his life.

Casting the bridle-rein over the horn of his saddle, our hero examined and loaded his weapons, making sure that all were in good working order; for such had been his excitement, that he had neglected his most usual and necessary practice of reloading at once. Thus he had forgotten to prepare himself for defense; although, as has been recorded, he mentioned to the fair girl, whom he had rescued, that he did not consider it improbable that he would be called upon to answer for the slaying of the cattle.

Harold had been on his way to Victoria, when he had halted in the timber to repair his saddle, his attention being then drawn by the merry song and laughter of Marietta Montague.

There was but a small amount of the superstitious in the mental "make-up" of Harold Holmes; but he was compelled to think that his meeting with Marietta had been brought about in a manner that seemed providential and pre-ordained.

Had not his horse been startled, and too frightened to graze further up the stream, by the sight of a black bear, he would have halted at that point for a midday meal, the necessities for which he carried in his saddle-bags; and had he not felt it wrong to shoot the bear and waste the delicious meat which he could not have packed, he would have plunged into the bottom in pursuit of Bruin, and thus have lost the opportunity of saving the beauty of the Guadalupe from a fearful death.

It did, indeed, seem most providential, and that unseen influences had guided him to a meeting with the one of all others who seemed destined for him.

He had wandered through the wilds, gratifying his own love for nature and adventure; but now for the time all was changed. His thirst for revenge had been set aside. His whole being was wrapped up in the angelic girl so recently and strangely met.

Each had taken the other by storm—each recognizing at once in the other the qualities and perfections they most admired.

Harold was somewhat perplexed in regard to Colonel Montague, who, he had heard, fairly worshiped his only daughter, and who was, so repute had it, an aristocratic old soldier, having high aims for his child, who would be a wealthy heiress.

The father might be proud and arrogant, with an iron, domineering will; but the daughter, as he realized fully, even on short acquaintance, was one who had fire and passion, and a strong will also. She had, no doubt, been petted from babyhood, and indulged in every whim; and she would resent to the bitter end any disparagement that should bear against the love that she had been powerless to mask from its object.

Harold Holmes loved this beauty of the Guadalupe with all his heart and soul; he knowing that she was a priceless jewel that a king might be proud to win. And he resolved that his whole aim should be to be worthy of the love of the fair girl; although not one sordid thought entered his mind, he feeling that he would entertain the same feelings toward her were she the child of the poorest teamster on the Gulf trail.

Thus deep in thought, the young man proceeded through the bottom-timber, and down the river, amid the semi-darkness, knowing that the stockmen could not follow any trails until the morrow.

For fully a mile he went, then, in a small open, he decided to encamp. But knowing that the grass was more nutritious and wholesome beyond the timber, he staked his horse in a cove-like space, surrounded on three sides by towering trees—it being impossible to discover the animal except by passing around a short bend, which would not be done by any traveler going down or up the stream, unless they chanced to be searching closely for him.

Returning to the little "open," after carefully rubbing his horse down with cool, green grass, Harold started a fire, made coffee in his quart tin-cup, and broiled some dried beef. This, with some corn-pone, served for his frugal sup-

per, and dinner combined. He next betrayed himself a Rio Grande traveler, by producing prepared shucks and tobacco from his pouch; rolling, igniting, and smoking cigarette after cigarette, with evident enjoyment, and allowing his fire to die out, as he sat in deep reverie upon his saddle.

For the first time, in his prairie and chaparral wanderings, he was disinclined to sleep, when encamped upon Mother Earth, beneath the blue vault of heaven, except when surrounded by deadly dangers.

Suddenly Harold started, as if an important thought flashed through his brain, and he quickly drew a packet of paper from his side-pocket.

Selecting a letter from the same, more by feeling than by sight, he cast himself at length upon the sward, his head near the smoldering fire, which he blew into a small blaze; then, holding the letter beyond the tiny flame, his arms encircling the embers, our hero read the epistle, in a low voice. It was as follows:

"St. Louis, May 4, 185—.

"MY DEAR FRIEND HAROLD:—

"Yours, of a recent date, is at hand, and I was greatly surprised to learn that you had, as yet, gained no clew as to the whereabouts of the dastard who ruined, and then doubtless murdered your sister by throwing her into the Mississippi river. Agreeably to my promise to you, I have been on the watch for the miscreant, since my sojourn in this city; but with not the slightest success.

"He is an adept at disguising, and has numerous aliases; and it has occurred to me, that, being such a wretch—notwithstanding his confidence that there is no proof against him—he would naturally leave the vicinity of the scenes of his crimes. As you have means, and ample leisure, I would advise you to search for him in Texas; frequenting the gambling resorts. I would not advise this, did I not know that you are above temptation, and can take care of yourself.

"The fiend, of whom you are in search, will not recognize you now, as you were but a youth when he last saw you. Think over my advice, and believe me, I would myself assist you, had I the time and means to spare.

"Trusting to hear from you at an early date, and that you are on the track of some favorable intelligence, I am, as ever,

"Your sincere friend and schoolmate,
"ROGER RAINBOLT.

"To HAROLD HOLMES, Esq.,

"St. Charles Hotel, New Orleans, La."

"Yes, Roger," muttered Harold, as he refolded the letter, and replaced it carefully within his breast-pocket; "I have followed your advice, and a long and tedious series of trails has given me no clew to the dastard, who crushed the fair flower of our family into the mire, and then hurled her, unprepared, before her God!

"But, by Heavens!" springing to his feet, while his eyes blazed, and his words burst forth, in unnatural tones; "yes, by all my hopes of happiness, here and hereafter, I again swear that I will track the coward, the inhuman monster, if it takes me all the remaining years of my life!

"I'll halt not, despair not—even to fully enjoy the pure, angelic love of Marie Montague.

"The pale face of my darling sister, floating down the swift currents of the Father of Waters, her long hair winding about and around her white arms; the dead face, with its soulless eyes fixed upon the silvery moon, horror and deathly terror frozen in their depths; a pleading cry for mercy upon those lips, benumbed by death; while the cry was smothered in the mad waters—thus I see Hortense, in my sleeping and waking dreams!

"She is ever with me, urging me on the trail of vengeance. Her spirit is guarding me from deadly dangers, warning me by mysterious and soul-felt emotions, that are strange—and beyond the power of man to account for, explain, or describe!

"But what connection has Marie, beautiful Marie Montague, with my revenge? The same mysterious influences, that have heretofore guided me, at times against my will and judgment, caused me to break my camp long before dawn, this morning, and proceed down the river on the north, in place of the south side—the nearest route to Victoria. Thus bringing me, as an actor, into all the events so startling; and opening out, in all its rose-tinted happiness the heretofore unknown, undreamed-of heaven of love.

"It has been a most happy consolation to believe that the spirit of my poor sister has thus guided me on the trail to avenge her. But it does not seem as if the latest event could have any bearing on the main object of my life. Just the opposite, indeed; for I am plunged deeply in love, and that is calculated to lessen my thirst, and ardor for revenge, and cause me to waste much precious time.

"All my searching has, thus far, been fruitless; but this much I know—the dastard, I seek, is not south of the Guadalupe. What is that?"

A low whistle, from the undergrowth, caused the last words of Harold to be delivered in extreme amazement, and he ran his hand around his belt to the butt of his revolver; but, at the same instant, a lasso hissed viciously through the air, the deadly noose falling over his head and shoulders. It was jerked tight, on the instant, binding his arms to his side.

The next moment, Harold Holmes was thrown prostrate upon the sward, bound hand and foot, and a half-dozen burly, bewhiskered Texans were bending over him, uttering exultant curses and ejaculations.

CHAPTER VIII.

A BRIEF RESPIRE.

"THERE, gentlemen, that will do, I reckon!" said Harold in a cool and calm voice, as the ropes were knotted by the Texans about his ankles.

"You all show considerable dexterity in manipulating the rawhide; but I must beg of you to proceed no further, for I am not yet ready for the branding-iron. It seems to me it would be more manly for a fewer number to hurl themselves upon one peaceable traveler.

"Who are you? Bandits of the border, with a consciousness that you deserve to be treated thus and so, and consequently use others in the manner you expect to be your own doom presently?"

From the instant that our hero heard the lasso hiss through the air he had known that the cattle-owners he had seen on the trail of the stampede had, by accident, discovered his horse and searched him out. He now knew that resistance was useless.

As to the rancheros, they were astounded at the manner and words of their captive and his utter coolness.

They gathered in a circle around him; rough men of the border, well used to desperate characters.

That they were favorably impressed by the young man's daring disregard of themselves was evident. But the impression thus made could not last; for they could recall just such bravado in the most desperate assassins and bandits they had met with.

"Pard Brown," said one, who seemed to be a leading spirit among them, "lead his critter hyer-a-ways, an' some on yer hump yerselves fer wood. We'll light a blaze an' take a squar' peep at this fightin'-cock. Rackon ef he warn't well roped, an' his gaffs stripped off, he'd sorter make things lively with we-uns."

The man designated as Brown at once departed on his mission, as requested; and others went groping for deadwood and dry brush, while those who remained seated themselves on the sward.

Our hero lay outstretched and unable to move, so securely had he been bound.

"Say, mister," spoke the leader, as the fire again began to blaze up, "what yer doin' 'rout' this hyer section? Lookin' fer a locate ter open out in ther butcher biz, I reckon? Does yer b'long ter some outlaw gang? Yer seems posted es ther manner o' perceedin's."

"You 'jumped' me in about as workmanlike a manner as any men could who were used to the business," returned Harold, calmly. "I have some little idea how such things are done on the Rio Grande, as I have more than once been very near being corraled and dissected by Mexican bandits. But I did not suppose there were any white men of like character in this portion of the country; therefore I did not guard against them. But you ask about myself.

"I am hunting no particular 'locate,' or opening for any particular business. I am not a butcher by trade; although I fancy I can lay a four-year-old steer out in about as neat a manner as a professional man could do.

"I do not use an ax, though; and I don't care to dabble in blood. Therefore I never skin my game."

The rancheros were doubly dumfounded at this speech.

"Wa-al, I'm dog-goned!" burst from one of them in surprise, while curses, loud and deep, came from all at the same time.

Just then Brown came up with Harold's horse.

"Hyer's ther critter, pard Holt," he said, "an' hit's ther best marked piece o' boss-meat 'tween hyer an' San Antone. Dang'd ef hit ain't!"

"His sorter stock ginerly straddles piert nags," was the reply. "Boyees, hit's too dark ter kerry on our leeble biz. Hit 'u'd be no easy job ter find a limber hold our meat up without thar bein' consider'ble brush fer him ter kick ag'in' an' brace hisself. What yer think?"

The light of the replenished fire showed no emotion expressed upon the countenance of the captive.

This increased the wonder of the rancheros.

They all at once decided that the man whom they had bound was no ordinary human. His clothing indicated that he had spoken the truth in regard to his having been on the Rio Grande, yet this assertion was damaging to him, as the most lawless and dangerous characters were at the time there congregated.

"Sot him up, boyees!" directed Holt, sending a squirt of tobacco-juice spitefully into the fire.

"I don't reckon by ther look o' yer an' ther way yer spits out Simon-pure 'Nited States, thet ye're any man's fool," added the leader.

Our hero, as he was now seated, facing the blaze, swept the half circle of rancheros with a

piercing glance as he replied in the same unconcerned manner:

"I have passed in the immediate vicinity of a number of eager and noted fool-killers, and they never gave me the slightest notice; therefore, I presume that you have judged me correctly. I am inclined to think, however, that fool-killers are not very numerous in this section."

Although untutored men, they all understood the covert meaning of Harold's last remark, and his general manifestation of taunting disgust at their treatment of him. Many a hand now went up to revolver, and loud curses came from all.

"Hold, gents!" added the young man in a clear voice of command. "Why is all this nonsense? Why have you stolen in this way upon a solitary man and bound him like a dog?"

"Why have you not come to me like men and asked me to explain why I shot down a score of your beeves upon the plain a mile or so west from this spot—although, in my opinion, no explanation is needed.

"I should judge that you ought to see, by the way they are lying, that the animals were shot all from one point and by one man, upon whom they were rushing, and who would have been trampled to death beneath their hoofs had he not acted just as he did.

"Had I dashed into your herds, as the cattle were feeding, and shot them down wantonly, you might be justified, perhaps, in treating me as you have done; but you know differently."

The amazement of the rancheros had been great at Harold's first speech; and his now open avowal of his act increased that feeling. They were forced to feel that he was putting them to shame, while he was helplessly bound and at their mercy.

For all this, their cattle were dead; and he, according to his own admission, had shot them.

No crime was more sure of punishment than this on the Texas border. But in the present case, they could see no motive in the act. This man had not profited in the least by the killing of the steers.

It was a case so strange, in fact heretofore unknown, that all were puzzled, although so much infuriated at their loss; but they could not believe that a man, so well mounted, would have allowed himself to get caught in such a stampede.

"Ye're puttin' some putty sharp lingo, stranger," said Holt with much indignation. "We-uns understand ther way ther critters was shot, fer we ain't no fools, es yer insinewates. We ain't ther pilgrims ter go fer a man in a gentle, soothin' kinder way; 'specially when we hes a long-mellin' suspicion thet he's crooked, clean through."

"Es to ther way we-uns jumped yer, we'd ha' bin ormighty big fools to hev run in on yer any other sort, arter knowin' what a shooter yer war. We'd 'a' stood a show ter hev been laid out es cold es them steers, ef we'd run in on yer camp arter dark.

"We sot ye up es somebuddy what had somethin' ag'in' us, an' hed jist bored ther critters fer ter git even; but I doesn't remember, fur es I goes, o' ever sottin' my peepers onter yer.

"Thar's a myst'ry 'bout ther thing somewhar an' we'll choke bit outen yer; we knows yer hes sharp eyes an' a ormighty piert nag, an' thar war no call fer yer to git cotched in ther stompede.

"Yer'd make a good lawyer, I reckon; but we-uns ginerly 'tends ter our own law 'bout hyer. Ye're a stranger, wi' extry togs an' shooters, an' a speedy nag; which air 'spicious, long es nobuddy knows yer, an' yer dozen't lay claim ter no biz 'rout' hyer. Ain't thet 'bout ther way ter put hit, boyees?" Turning to the others.

"Thet's straight up gab!"

"Now ye're talkin', Holt!"

"Yer hes hit right down fine an' squar', pard, dog'd ef yer hesn't!"

"He's shot our stock, an' orter be strung up ter dry!"

"Whioh be air gwine ter be."

"Yer bet!"

Such expressions went around the half circle of excited rancheros.

Harold Holmes gazed from one to another of them, with an amused smile upon his handsome face, then he said:

"The last man who speaks wins this crowd! And so, boys, if you'll kindly spread a blanket, adjust my saddle for a 'heading,' and lay my carcass out on it, I'll take a snooze; for I've been in the saddle all day.

"I think we'll fix this thing up, and be better friends in the morning—in fact, I am sure of it. I hope you'll agree that we've talked enough. It's tedious to both you and myself. You are all weary, I'm pretty sure.

"Take my advice, roll up, and go to sleep. All your talking will not bring those precious steers back to life."

After a short interval of staring, one at another, in increased astonishment, Holt again broke the ominous silence.

"Thet's about ther best we kin do, boyees; ef he does say hit! He's a dang'd queer coon all

"round, an' I reckon he'll keep until daylight. Leastways we'll try hit on.
"Do es he says, an' loosen ther ropes a leetle. One on us 'll stan' guard."

CHAPTER IX. THE DOOM AVERTED.

ONLY once in the night was our hero disturbed from sleep, and that was upon the arrival of another ranchero, who had followed his companions on the trail, and who expressed great pleasure, in very coarse language, at the capture of the man who had shot the beeves.

This ranchero brought with him a large canteen of whisky, and the Texans, being awakened, joined him, not only once, but several times, in sampling its contents. Harold was weary and sleepy, and, although he felt that the new arrival with the whisky, would prove very damaging to him, he resolved that he would not allow himself to be deprived of his regular sleep on that account.

So he rolled over again, and sunk into slumber.

Long before daylight, he was aroused by the stir in camp. The Texans were preparing the morning meal, and all seemed excited with drink.

As Harold lay, and thought over his position, it now seemed more serious than it did the night previous; especially as the rancheros were now in liquor. What had best be done?

If he knew positively that Marietta had informed her father of what had occurred, he could then explain his conduct, but, at present, he did not feel at liberty to do so for fear of compromising her.

If he revealed the true state of affairs, he well knew that the Texans would drag him, in a most humiliating manner, to the mansion of Colonel Montague, and there force him to prove his assertion. This would, of course, create a scene.

He felt that the maiden would be backward about revealing the particulars to her father until a propitious moment, and he had no doubt that the colonel would be in a rage against the man to whom she owed her life, especially if she manifested in the least her regard for her rescuer.

These thoughts troubled Harold not a little.

It was probable that Holt, from past experience, did not care to banter words with a man so much his superior in the use of language, so he would scarcely be treated to any further argument.

One of the rancheros now brought him, in silence, a quantity of food and some coffee, unbinding his wrists in order that he might eat.

Soon after all equipped their steeds and made ready for the march, the horse of Harold being saddled and bridled and he lifted upon it.

"I see," remarked our hero, coolly, "that you have not allowed your unjust animosity toward a stranger to become less demonstrative, although I have put the case plainly to you."

"Now, understand me, for the last time: I have not the slightest fear of anything that you can do, but I do naturally object to be treated in this way, like a horse-thief. If any violence is offered to me it will be paid dearly for before many days, I can assure you."

"You're in a pretty fix ter threaten," returned Holt. "Ther best thing yer kin do air ter say a prayer er two. We-uns air reg'lators, an' we runs this hyer section. Thar's bin some hosses taken of late, an' I'm inclined ter presume yer knows 'bout whar ther critters air. Yer'll do fer a 'zample."

"Snake him along an' string him up!"

"Choke ther condemned beef-killer offen this hyer yearth!"

"Yank ther ban'box dandy up a limb! Nobuddy, 'ceptin' hoss-stealers, card-sharps an' stage-cleaners w'ars sich highferlutin' togs."

"Too much chin-music an' not 'nough rope!"

"Gi'n him a chance ter dance on nothin'!"

"Sen' him whar he won't shoot no more steers!"

Such outcries as these now filled the air in fierce and vengeful tones. Harold began to realize that he was in the power of merciless men.

"I see," he exclaimed, "that you are all half-drunk, and that you are determined to commit a crime. I am, therefore, forced to explain what, for obvious reasons, I should otherwise have kept secret. I shot your cattle to save the life of the daughter of Colonel Montague. She was riding her pony on the prairie and would have been trampled to death had I not done what I did."

"I have been obliged to reveal this to keep you from committing a murder. I would have greatly preferred not to embarrass Miss Montague by bringing her name into this affair."

"Did yer know ther curnil's darter 'fore yesterday?" asked Holt, the others evidently taken aback.

"I had never seen her before," was the reply.

"What handle air yer travelin' under, an' what's yer way o' gittin' 'long in ther worl'?" again inquired Holt, apparently for want of anything else to say.

"My name is now, and has always been, Harold Holmes. I am from Louisiana originally, and lately from the Rio Grande. I am on business of my own, which does not concern you in the least. Go on with your catechism!"

"All I hes ter say, boyees," said Holt, "air thet we'll take Mister Holmes ter the curnil's; an' ef Miss Mar'ettar 'splains things ter gibe with his—all kerrect. But I sw'ar Curnil Montague hes gut ter pay fer ther critters!"

Leading the party down the bed of a wash-out, Holt, upon reaching the stream, forded to a like place on the opposite side.

Five minutes after, they were all on the wagon-trail that led up the river toward the mansion of Colonel Montague. Soon, however, Holt drew rein, ordering all hands to halt.

"Dang'd," he exclaimed, "ef hyer doesn't come ther curnil hisself, right on ther whiz! Wonder ef he kin hev foun' out our leetle picnic?"

At these words, Harold became greatly excited. He knew, that if Marietta had not informed her father of the events that occurred the previous afternoon, his case was more perilous than before.

Although bound to his horse in an ignominious manner, a captive, and surrounded by those who care more for the safety of their property than his life, the young man presented a sight that could not fail to convince an observer that he was a true man, brave and honest to the core.

"Hello, curnil!" yelled Holt, as the old soldier's horse bounded snorting up to the crowd of rancheros, and its rider gazed in amazement at Harold Holmes.

"Air anythin' ther matter at ther house, thet yer comes rampantin' this 'arly in ther mornin'?" was the first interrogative.

"Nothing has occurred at my home," replied the colonel. "I am on my way to Indianola, on business, and am surprised to see you all here. What is up, this morning, gentlemen?"

"We-uns hes corraled a stranger, hyer. I'll interduc' him. This air Curnil Montague, Mister Holmes from ther Rio Grande!"

The colonel touched his hat politely, notwithstanding the questionable position of the young man, who bowed, and smiled courteously.

"We-uns corraled him las' night, curnil," continued Holt, "an' war 'bout ter string him up fer shootin' twenty o' our best beeves, what gut on a stompede. He asserwates thet he rid out onter ther plain, an' shot ther critters, ter save yer darter from bein' tromped. Did she tell o' hit?"

The colonel gazed at both men, for some moments, before replying:

"My daughter was in the bottom-timber, yesterday afternoon; but I do not think she went to ride," he said, in a constrained voice. "She certainly told me nothing of it. I do not, in the least understand it. Did you acknowledge that you shot the cattle, Mr. Holmes? And can you not give a straight account of yourself?"

"I have nothing to explain further," said our hero, with quiet determination. "It is not my intention to represent a daughter as derelict in her duty to her father. If Miss Montague has not mentioned the circumstance, it is not my place to go any further, or to say anything more to justify what I have done."

"I am very sure that a young lady, mounted upon a 'paint' pony, would have been trampled to death, had I not used my rifle with rapidity and skill. But, drive on your mule team, and do not keep Colonel Montague waiting, when he is on important business."

The colonel was now, evidently, very much excited; but he was anxious to be on his way, and very impatient at being delayed.

"I will investigate this affair upon my return, Holt," he said, quickly; "but it is important now that I proceed on my way. I know it is a very serious affair, but certainly this young man derived no benefit from it; so you ought not to act hastily in the matter."

"However, do not disturb my daughter, but await my return. I have no doubt that Mr. Holmes will be able to prove himself an honest man. Do nothing rashly, Holt. Good-morning!"

Harold merely bowed, in acknowledgment. He felt sure that his last hope was gone. The colonel's words, although seemingly of a conciliatory nature toward the rancheros, had done more harm to the captive than good.

But, although Harold had his doubts in regard to his safety, he was not prepared for what followed, as soon as Colonel Montague rode away.

"Come on back, boyees!" ordered Holt; "we'll hev a leetle court of our own. Hit's a dead sure thing now, thet Mister Holmes hes bin lyin', fer ther curnil w'd ba' knowed."

All proceeded across the river again; and, within the curve of a bend in the stream, at once organized a court. The investigation led only to a repetition of what has been detailed.

After leaving the point where the colonel had been met, the rancheros had indulged more freely in whisky; being much rejoiced that their prisoner had not been able to prove his

assertion in regard to his reasons for shooting the cattle.

The affair soon ended in a verdict of "Guilty" being unanimously rendered.

"Guilty of what?" demanded Harold, in a fury.

"Guilty o' shootin' twenty of our cattle, of bein' a 'spicious stranger, without biz, an' gittin' up a big lie on a 'specterble young gal, ter save yer neck, which air dang'd cowardly!"

"Let me loose, and give me a fair chance, and I'll prove whether I'm a coward or not, by fighting the whole crowd!" burst out the young man, now fast losing command of himself.

"You are all a set of drunken cowards, to impose in this way upon a single man, condemning him to die an ignominious death. I believe the whole gang of you are obliged to work together, to save yourselves from being brought to justice for your crimes!"

It is difficult to determine whether the rancheros would have dared to proceed to extremes with Harold; but his fury at the farce of a trial, the unjust manner in which he had been used, and the failure of the maiden, whom he had risked his life to save, to give him due credit for the act, where it was most deserved—all this, with the pain of his bonds, and his humiliation at being thus at the mercy of a crowd of drunken ignoramuses, caused him to lose all prudence, and launch out in language that was well calculated to infuriate his captors. This was the result.

The maddened mob, upon hearing his insulting words, were at first greatly amazed; then they rushed upon him with fury, a lariat being immediately prepared, the deadly noose adjusted about his neck, and Harold dragged to the nearest tree amid a vocal pandemonium, the rancheros being murder mad.

In another moment the slack of the rope was cast over a limb and pulled by a dozen eager hands; but at the very instant that the enraged men gathered their strength to pull Harold Holmes upward to his death, a shrill cry burst on the astonished ears of all, and Pinto shot like an arrow from a bow into their midst, Marietta upon his back, a knife in one hand and a revolver in the other.

Up she dashed, her pistol cocked and presented, shouting, as she cut the rope:

"Back, cowards, back! The first man who raises his weapon against Harold Holmes dies by my hand! I swear it—I, Marietta Montague!"

CHAPTER X.

MEETING AND PARTING.

UNACUSTOMED to call his master at an early hour, the slave who had been ordered by Colonel Montague to awaken him overdid it; for he aroused his master at three o'clock, as he did also Aunt Huldry the cook, and the negro who had the care of the saddle-horses.

However, the colonel was not in the least angry, his mind being bent on the business in hand; and he performed his toilet expeditiously, resolving to travel as far as was possible before the hotter portion of the day.

When breakfast was eaten, the colonel found his fine bay horse at the door awaiting him. Then he thought of his daughter, and that she would feel badly if she did not see him before he left.

At length he decided, saying to his hostler:

"Jim, see your young mistress as soon as she comes down, and tell her that I did not wish to disturb her at such an early hour. Say that I shall endeavor to return in less than three days."

"I'll tell missy ebervy word, mars' curnil," said Jim, as he stood bat in hand.

Without more delay, Colonel Montague proceeded slowly down the drive, in order that Marietta might not hear the sound of his horse's hoofs. Then when he got beyond the negro cabins, he drove spurs and rode rapidly toward Victoria.

It was at least an hour after daybreak when Marietta Montague came down-stairs, and she was greatly disappointed at finding her father gone.

She had laid awake the earlier portion of the night, occasioned by the thought of having kept from her only parent so important a matter as the occurrences of the previous afternoon.

Not only this, but her conscience had greatly troubled her at having been disloyal to her father, and allowing a stranger to drive every thought of him from her mind—and that too when her father had been conversing with her.

She felt conscious that she had been unfilial, deceitful and undutiful. Not that she now loved Harold less, but that she had allowed to almost utterly repudiate her father's well-known wishes—had deceived him greatly by not confiding all to him, who prized her as the apple of his eye.

She became greatly worried therefore, and filled with self-condemnation; dreading, too, lest some evil might befall her father, to whom she had not said good-by.

He was striving to his utmost to retrieve his fallen fortunes, and for her benefit; and his

words to that effect, on the previous evening, had cut her to the heart, when she considered how true he was and how disloyal she had just been to him.

Tortured by these thoughts, the young girl disregarded the call to breakfast, and at length became so exceedingly nervous that she resolved to gallop down the Guadalupe on the east side, and endeavor to intercept her father below Victoria, where it was probable he would stop for some little time.

The course which the colonel had taken was due south for nearly five miles, thus passing through a portion of the town on the west side of the river.

By crossing at the little ford, and galloping all the way on the east side of the stream, in a southeasterly direction, it was possible for her to overtake or intercept him, especially if he lingered in the town to confer with friends.

Catching up her whip and gloves, the maiden now ran around by the garden path to the little "open," where Pinto had been left the previous night, blowing a call on her bugle as she ran.

Almost as soon as herself the little negro Pomp was on hand; but greatly surprised and worried at the changed appearance and manner of his young mistress, who failed to give him a word or smile.

Pinto was quickly saddled and bridled, and soon they were dashing past the huge tree, where the evening before Marietta had sat with Harold Holmes.

Where was Harold now? Where had he passed the night? And was it possible that she would meet him during her morning ride? These were the thoughts that filled her mind as she passed her favorite retreat.

So changed had she become in a single night and the little half of a day that preceded it, that the girl began to fear that her mind must be losing its balance—that she was becoming insane.

Dashing up the east bank, after fording the Guadalupe, Marietta soon cleared the timber, and came in view of the slaughtered beeves, above and around which were hundreds of buzzards, ravens, vultures, and yelping coyotes.

Most forcibly did this scene recall her deadly peril, and the daring rescue, and she shuddered at the thought of what might have been, had it not been for Harold Holmes. Touching Pinto with her whip, the pony flew, like an earth-sweeping swallow, down the Guadalupe, and along the verge of the timber.

For nearly a mile Marietta thus sped, when of a sudden wild yells reached her ears from within the horseshoe bend, the heel of which she was passing.

Gazing toward the point whence the sounds proceeded, she became in an instant as ghastly as a corpse. Her fair form trembled from head to foot. But it was only for an instant.

Jerking Pinto half-around, she lashed him within the walls of timber, at the same time drawing a dagger and revolver from a bag that hung at the horn of her saddle.

The scene that now met her view was one that caused the very blood to congeal in her veins at first, and then to rush through the natural channels with electric-like velocity.

But a short distance from the point where she had heard the shouts of rage and exultation, she saw a crowd of rough-looking men dragging a human being beneath the limbs of a tree. Others were casting a rope over the branch, and pulling upon it. Their faces, even at that distance, seemed to be flushed and brutal with drink, and a mad thirst for revenge.

At the very instant that the full details of this dread sight were comprehended, the victim of the mob was half turned around, and his face was revealed.

Then a piercing shriek shot from the lips of Marietta Montague; for the face of the victim of Judge Lynch was that of her rescuer, Harold Holmes!

At the appearance and words of our heroine, and the sight of the deadly tube that presented full at them, the rancheros slunk back, abased and cowed.

The aspect of mingled disdain, contempt, and fury, in the face of this beautiful girl—so universally known and admired—and the belief that she would shoot at the slightest provocation, not only caused every man to refrain from speaking a word in explanation, but to become nearly sober.

There was not one of them, who was not now convinced that Harold Holmes had spoken the truth.

Marietta had not only taken his part, and taken it well, but she had spoken his name, as he had given it.

This young girl was a royal queen on the prairies, a being of supernatural beauty in their eyes; and all on the Guadalupe were proud of her. Consequently the sobered rancheros were in no enviable state of mind; and the words and proceedings of our heroine were not such as caused them any relief in that respect.

With her own hands Marietta quickly unloosed the noose of the severed rope from the neck of Harold, who stood, dazed with surprise at her

unlooked-for appearance. Without once allowing her eyes to rest upon him, she swept the ring of humiliated rancheros, from one point to another, with keen glance; her revolver still pointed.

Then, urging Pinto forward, she quickly cut free the wrists of our hero, placing the knife in his hand, as she said, in clear tones:

"Harold Holmes! there stands your black steed, upon which you saved my life, yesterday. Whoever has this gentleman's weapons, I demand that they give them into his hands immediately. I will consider, in charity, that you are drunk—all of you!

"I am certain that you pounced upon this brave man unawares, in a cowardly manner, or some of you would have been as useless as your dead cattle; which, by the way, I shall pay for."

The belt and arms of Harold were now handed him, by Holt; and the former mounted his horse, once more a free man.

"Do me the favor," said the girl, "of proceeding from this disgraceful locality, up the river, at once. I will follow, and will see that justice is done you for this villainous outrage."

Disregarding her request, the young man replied:

"With due respect, and with many thanks to you, Miss Montague, I beg to say that I have been a little in fault, as well as yourself, in this matter."

"Had you informed your father of the little episode through which we became known to each other, the rope would not have been placed around my neck."

"These men had a right to feel incensed. I am not here to make trouble. I generally attend to my own affairs, and I claim a right to keep the knowledge of those affairs to myself. My character can be easily ascertained, from the cradle to the present time."

"Here," throwing a bag of gold, which he took from an under pocket in his saddle-bags, at the feet of Holt; "here is more than the worth of your cattle! You have but asked your own."

"Thanking you very much, Miss Montague, for your most energetic service in my behalf, I bid you good-morning; and to these men I say that I am to be found in Victoria, if any of them should desire any further satisfaction, that is, in a square and honorable way. But I object strongly to being run in on by numbers, or strung up to a limb, without having any crime proved against me. Good-day, all!"

With these words our hero raised his sombrero politely, drove spurs, and darted away.

To say that he had once more amazed the rancheros, would be putting it mildly. But their astonishment was as nothing compared with that of Marietta, who lowered her revolver, and gazed in bewilderment at Harold as he spoke. Then, as he galloped away, turning his horse down the stream, in place of toward the ford, as she had requested, and as she had no doubt that he would have done, her face became pale as death.

For a moment she hesitated, and then, with a cut of the whip to Pinto, flew like the wind on the back trail, turning up the Guadalupe toward the ford, and the home she had so lately quitted.

The rancheros stood in their tracks, dumb with a combination of emotion, from the strange happenings and words that had so bewildered and puzzled them. Soon, however, they mounted, and proceeded up the river, all asserting that they would seek out this most remarkable, but square and honest man, and apologize to him at the first opportunity. They also vowed that they would return to him his gold.

Marietta lashed Pinto up the river, to and across the ford, giving the pony free rein; for her eyes were blinded by tears, and her form convulsed with sobs, being cut to the very soul.

Harold had suffered more than tongue could tell, through her not informing her father of her great peril, and subsequent rescue. How this had been, Marietta could not conceive; but Harold had asserted it, and it was indisputable.

She had herself suffered greatly, from the same cause; and now Harold had gone, and after she had betrayed her intense love for him—left her, as she could not help believing, in a greatly offended state of mind at her conduct.

What did it mean? Where was he going? Was his farewell forever? If so, she would die—she could not live. Could it be possible that the rancheros had, when Harold was in their power, seen her father, and called upon him to certify that their captive had shot the beeves, in order that he might save his daughter, in the stampede?

Could it be that this was the case; and that her father had denied that it was so?

This seemed the only reasonable solution of the enigma; yet how could it be, when the colonel went down the Guadalupe on the west side, and the rancheros and her lover were on the east?

The more she pondered on it, the more she became filled with anguish. In this state, she

halted beneath the dense shades of the huge tree, where she had owned her love—a love that had been so short, yet so full of the extremes of joy and misery.

Dismounting, and allowing Pinto free range, Marietta seated herself upon a projecting root of the tree, her favorite seat, and covering her face with her handkerchief, she gave way to tears; presenting a sight strongly in contrast to her appearance, as she had galloped so furiously into the midst of the rancheros.

For some time she sat thus. Then she sprang to her feet, her uncovered face half bent forward, and listening eagerly.

Marietta's features changed in expression, from anguish to joy and relief; for she heard the clear and musical notes of a silver flute, playing a pleading air—an air of love! She knew that the performer was not far away, and that the lips that touched the flute, were those of Harold Holmes!

CHAPTER XI.

SNARED.

BEFORE NOON, on the day following the arrival in Indianola of the trio of plotters they had perfected their plans to receive Colonel Montague, and secure the favorable working of their scheme.

As the hotel was considered too public a place, and where many people acquainted with the colonel might be guests, a deserted house on the northern outskirts of the town was engaged for a month from the person having it in charge, and one of the rooms was at once fitted up as an office.

This little dwelling contained but two rooms below, having an attic also, the size of the peaked roof. It stood away by itself, entirely free from the intrusion of outsiders, and off from the principal trail up and down the coast.

Wines, liquors, cigars, and cards were purchased; and a villainous-looking Mexican was engaged as man of all work, he professing to be a cook of no mean accomplishment, as well as a *vaquero* and lassoist.

They had satisfied themselves, before employing him, that Antonio was a thorough villain in every respect.

A complete knowledge of the surrounding country was gained from him, and a favorable place selected, at which to waylay the colonel.

Indianola was but a small village at the time, and there were frequently more wagons loading with freight in the streets, than there were buildings in the town. Nearly all the people were strangers there, and to each other, which made it easy for the conspirators to avoid any particular notice, or form acquaintances.

The elder Wickford had chosen the attic of their hired house for his station, rejoiced to find many knot-holes in the flooring. Lying along it, in the rear of the point where he had directed his son to seat their victim, when at cards, he could easily discover the denomination of those held by the colonel, and thrust a duplicate of each through a crack, in plain view of his son and Hank; thus aiding their scheme immensely.

They knew that Colonel Montague would be in Victoria and receive his letter, and that he would probably then make an immediate start, and reach Indianola the following night.

Everything being in readiness, these three scoundrels spent the intervening time in rehearsing their parts; and, as the sun sunk low in the west, young Wickford, Hank, and Antonio mounted their horses, and rode up the bay toward Mat-gorda, leaving the elder of the Wickfords in charge of the dwelling, to await their return, in somewhat torturing suspense.

When clear of view from the town, the three men turned northwest, and galloped in the direction of Chocolate Creek; arriving thither, as the sun sunk below the western plains.

Then they made their way toward the wagon-trail, under cover of the mesquites; finding, to their joy, that no wagon-train was there encamped.

Secreting their horses, they stole out on the western margin of the mesquites, and gazed over the broad rolling prairie toward Victoria.

The sun had now sunk below the horizon; but, as yet, they could discover no horseman.

Leaving Antonio on the watch, Hank and Will crossed over the stream to the eastern margin of the mesquites; there to gaze upon the prairie toward Indianola.

A large number of camps were to be seen in that direction; and they decided that it would not be prudent to return to the town by the road, as in the evening, all passers-by would be critically inspected by the lounging teamsters.

They were determined not to mince matters in the least; but, if Colonel Montague did put in an appearance, they would have him in their clutches at any, and all hazards.

As they returned, they met Antonio, on the west bank of the stream, running hastily toward them, and exclaiming, when within speaking distance:

"Senors, a horseman is coming toward the creek, on the plain! He rides an American horse."

"He's our meat; I'll gamble on that!" said Hank, quickly. "Come on, Will! We must

make this a success. There is a good deal at stake."

"You're right, Hank!" was the reply. "There must be no failure, even if we have to lasso him; and I'm of the opinion we'd better do it."

"Good!" said Hank. "Antonio can attend to that biz, and do it up brown. You must jerk him, pard Antone, so he won't kick, or wink, for some time."

The lips of the Mexican curled away from his white, gleaming teeth like those of a wild beast and his expression was such that Hank and Will exchanged glances of surprise. The former remarked, in a low tone, as they followed the Greaser:

"We must watch Antonio. It has just struck me that he knows old Montague better than he has pretended—probably during the Mexican War—and that he hates him, and would knife him with a great deal of satisfaction. There is probably something personal as well."

"I believe you are right," said Will, "and we will keep an eye on him. He must not be permitted to take a revenge of his own and thus defeat our plans. I'll blow the confounded Greaser's brains out if he attempts to go beyond orders."

"But here we are on the margin of the prairie, and it is quite gloomy. No moon, I believe, to make our attempt more hazardous."

At this moment Antonio parted the mesquites and said:

"Caramba! Look! It is the Senor Colonel!"

"You have sharp eyes, Antonio," said Hank. "How long have you known this Senor Montague?"

"Many years," answered the Mexican, laconically.

It was evident that he was striving to avoid any show of emotion at the sight of the horseman, who was still some distance from them.

"You are wrong in regard to the moon, Will," said Hank, giving a warning gesture to his companion that he was not to excite the Mexican. "She's in a small cloud, but will show her face presently. Do you believe it is really the colonel? We must be sure of his identity, or get into a fine fix. It is lucky that Antonio can recognize him, for you can have but little recollection of him. What do you think, Will?"

"He is our game, sure!" asserted the young man. "Antonio, can you bring him to earth with your lasso without breaking his neck? I'll give you an extra doubloon if you'll lay him out senseless on the bank of the creek."

"The senors Americano pay well," answered the Greaser; "Antonio do his work well."

"Good!" said Hank. "If we went back to Indianola without him Jim Wickford would burst a blood-vessel. That's the man, beyond a doubt. That letter was well worded, and he bit the hook at once, it seems. Well, I've lost my wager."

"Oh, cuss the wager!" exclaimed Will, excitedly. "It is time for biz. Antonio, don't make a botch of it."

"The senors will stay here," said the Mexican. "When I sound a coyote bark, come!"

With these words, Antonio disappeared in the bushes, leaving Will and Hank crouched amid them, and peering out over the plain at the advancing horseman, now but a hundred yards away.

Beyond doubt it was Colonel Montague, and his horse seemed badly worn from travel. This the observers quickly determined. All seemed favorable.

The moment was pregnant. The occurrence soon to follow was such as would greatly change the lives of all three, and bring much of guilt, danger, and suffering. Will Wickford trembled with excitement. As for Hank Hodge, he had no particular object, except to help his old pard, and make some money for himself. But the suspense was intense and torturing.

It was soon, however, brought to an end.

When Antonio left his employers, he stole, half-bent, to the mesquites that bordered the approach to the crossing of the stream. It was now nearly dark, and quite so in the position that had been chosen by the Greaser, there being ample room for him to circle his lasso.

A moment more, and the horse of his intended victim neared his covert, the reins slack, and the animal's head lowering and snuffing toward the stream in its front. The Mexican had barely time to decide that the form upon the horse was that of the man for whom he was lying in wait, before his energies and skill were brought into use.

Only once was the deadly noose allowed to circle about his head. Then Antonio shot the rawhide dexterously upward and forward through the air, at the same instant hurling a stone directly at the horse, and giving a series of sharp barks, in imitation of a coyote.

The horse bounded forward in affright, down the bank and into the stream. The noose of the lasso, as intended, fell over the head of the colonel to the middle of his body, there being tightened, binding his arms to his side by a terrible jerk as the horse sprang forward.

The colonel fell, striking the earth with great

force, his head coming in contact with the hard trodden clay of the crossing with much violence.

With a tiger-like bound, revolver in hand, the Greaser reached the side of the prostrate man, intending to give him a blow upon the head with the butt of his weapon; but there was no need.

Colonel Montague lay senseless; and just as Hank and Will came crashing through the mesquites, the moon shone down from a rift in the clouds, fully revealing the form and face of the prostrate man.

"Good boy, Antonio!" said Hank in commendation. "Now, work lively! Lead one of the horses here, and bind the old man to the saddle. I have a drug here that will keep him under a while."

Will bent over the body of the colonel with an expression that was almost fiendish.

Antonio hastened to bring one of the horses, and then to catch that of Colonel Montague; then Hank and Will with difficulty lifted their victim upon the back of the animal, and there secured him.

Then, they all proceeded to the point where they had left their horses, and mounting, leaving the Mexican to lead the beast upon which the colonel had been placed, they hastened down the stream for some distance, and thence over the plain to Indianola.

Colonel Montague was indeed in the toils. The poor old man was completely in the power of those who were devoid of everything like honor, honesty, humanity, or mercy.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRIUMPH OF WRONG.

AFTER the departure of his son with Hank and Antonio, James Wickford paced the room that he had fitted up as an office in a state of mind bordering upon frenzy. He felt that if his tools failed in accomplishing their object their identity might, in some way, be disclosed, and thus they would be left to be hunted down by Montague himself.

So nervous was he that he had more frequent recourse to his bottle than usual and smoked continuously. The consequence of his over-indulgence was that he became much excited, and when, eventually, he heard the tramp of horses' hoofs in the yard he rushed out like a madman, demanding:

"Have you succeeded? Say 'yes,' or my brain will burst!"

"Yes it is, old pard," said Hank, "but if you don't be more careful with your tongue, you'll spoil the whole business. What's the matter with you?"

"Matter enough, I should say!" he returned. "Here I've been left alone for a coon's age and worried to death, fearing you'd make a botch of the whole thing, and even now I am not sure of it. Where is Will?"

"I'm here, father. But do go into the house. We have enough to attend to without talk. Open the door when you hear us come to it."

The elder Wickford returned to the house, cursing.

"Keep a tight grip on his legs, Will," directed Hank. "He weighs about a ton, I should say. Now we have him! Go easy, Antonio!"

As the words of Hank imply, the trio were engaged in lifting the colonel from the saddle to which he had been secured and carrying him to the house. When they reached the door Hank kicked it and it flew open.

"Jerk him in quick," he directed, "for our movements can be seen a long way in this light. You ought to have put out the candles, Jim. One had to be prudent in a job like this. But what the devil is the matter with you, old pard?"

The speaker was gazing in utter astonishment at James Wickford, who, from the further part of the apartment, was advancing in a half-crouched position, with a huge bowie-knife in his hand.

The face of Wickford was contorted with hatred and an unnatural thirst for revenge. That he had been drinking heavily and was now bent on murdering his old enemy was evident at a glance.

Hank, however, was equal to the occasion.

"Will!" he shouted, "attend to your father! He's drunk! Antonio, help me with the colonel into the next room. I've had about enough of this for one night. Here we've been working like dogs while the boss has been sucking down whisky. It is strange he should take a time like this to throw off on his friends."

Will Wickford began to reason with his father and succeeded at length in disarming him, but the eyes of the old man burned with an insane and dangerous luster, and he was little better than a madman until Hank had smuggled an opiate into his stomach through the medium of a glass of whisky. This had the effect of quieting his nerves and rendering him more natural.

Colonel Montague, as he now lay upon a couch, appeared more like a corpse than a living man.

"There lies your enemy, James Wickford," said Hank, in a low voice. "We have succeeded

so far. Antonio worked his part of it admirably, and I have given him a few drops of liquid that has sent him upon a temporary trip to oblivion.

"Now, I propose to lay cloths, saturated with whisky, about his head, the fumes of which he will be forced to breathe. Besides, I will pour a little fourth proof brandy down his throat at times."

"Mind you, Will and I found him on the bank of Chocolate Creek, in a senseless condition, his horse being near at hand; and, from a letter in his pocket, we inferred that he was on his way to meet this gentleman,"—pointing to Will—"Mr. Wyman Wales, who took him beneath his roof, he having rented this house, it being in a retired part of Indianola, to avoid the noise and confusion of the wagons and teamsters."

"How do you like that, Jim? But you must go slow on whisky, or all this goes for nothing."

Wickford, the elder, was exultant, though quieter; but his eyes still blazed with suppressed fury.

"It's lucky that you haven't got to get in any fine work in this game, Jim," said Hank; "or you'd give yourself away. Will and I will work the old man to-morrow for all he is worth, if you will only keep out of our way. But come, lock the door, and I'll attend to our patient. The Wickford blood is too excitable for such business."

Shaking his clinched fist at the senseless man, James Wickford followed Hank and Antonio from the room. Hank then closed and locked the door, putting the key in his pocket. He then proceeded to pour some liquor out for himself, passing the bottle to the Mexican, who had maintained silence throughout. He evidently judged that he had now gotten employment with parties whom he could "bleed" for quite a sum, if he kept his wits on the alert.

Hank began at once to carry out his plan to awaken in Colonel Montague, the old appetite for liquor; and Will succeeded in getting his father to lie down in the open air for the remainder of the night, while Antonio rolled himself in his blanket, near the horses.

Thus it was that Maurice Montague fell into the power of his merciless enemies.

After leaving the rancheros and their captive, the colonel had been, several times, on the point of returning home; so tortured was his mind in regard to the assertion of the young man, and his statement with reference to Marietta.

Could it be possible, he asked himself, that this stranger had spoken the truth? Could it be that his daughter had been saved from a terrible fate, and that she failed to inform him of the fact?

If this was really so—if Marietta had been in such peril, there could be only one reason why she had not spoken of it; and that was, that she had been so favorably impressed by her preserver, that she feared to tell of his daring deed, lest she might betray more interest in the stranger, than he (the colonel) would consider proper or becoming.

When Colonel Montague recalled the face, bearing and general appearance of the stranger, he was forced to admit to himself that this Harold Holmes was a young man who appeared to be far superior, in every way, to any with whom Marietta had ever associated, or, indeed, whom she had ever met; and having considered this, he was not so much surprised as before, and really began to believe that the young man had spoken truly.

The words and manner of the stranger, he remembered, were brave, honest and straightforward; and he seemed to look with scorn and contempt upon the men who had him in their power, and who had placed him in such a fearfully humiliating position.

Upon reflection, Colonel Montague decided that this young Holmes was apparently the last man who would be suspected of the wanton destruction of the property of another, or of endeavoring to shield himself by falsehood.

These reasonings placed the colonel in no enviable state of mind.

He had always worshiped his daughter, and could not bear the thought that she would ever marry and leave him, or even to love another as long as he lived; but the idea that she should become infatuated with a stranger was maddening, and caused the old soldier to tremble with the most intense excitement and apprehension, for the love of his daughter was life to him, and without her love he felt that insanity or death must come.

These thoughts so filled the mind of the old man that for miles he allowed his horse to travel at will; and, in consequence, he did not reach the vicinity of Indianola until night had cast its mantle over the earth, as has just been narrated—and then to fall into the power of his most relentless foes, of whose existence and conspiracy he was ignorant.

The cast of the lasso and the terrible jerk to earth had been so instantaneous—so totally undreamed of, in fact—and the brain of the colonel had been so filled with subjects which caused him to be absent-minded that he really knew not, comprehended not, what occurred, but was hurled into insensibility, typical of

death, as quickly as if he had been shot through the heart.

Surely the Fates seemed to have but become aware of the existence of the Montagues, father and daughter, on the previous afternoon; and began at once to hurl upon them both a deluge of mingled love and hate—or the consequences which generally attend each of these emotions.

CHAPTER XIII.

AMONG THE TIGERS.

HANK HODGE had no idea of retiring, as he considered that the success of the plot depended upon the constant watching of Colonel Montague.

Thus far, thanks to the skill of Antonio, all had gone on well; except the over-indulgence in liquor which had somewhat demoralized James Wickford, and rendered him unfit for having anything further to do with the proposed programme until he had sobered off. With this end in view, Will Wickford was now forced to remain with his father.

No sooner had the colonel been lassoed, and bound, than Hank felt double the interest in the plot that he had previously done.

He realized that there was money to come out of it, and that he would get no small amount as his share; this amount depending greatly upon his personal action in the matter.

He felt that he was competent to manage the colonel, as he knew well the action of the drug which he had administered; and also that the liquor, he intended to force down the old man's throat, would render him insanely eager for more stimulants. He recalled a time when he himself had been forced, by a long run of ill-luck, to stop drinking, and that not a drop had passed his lips for nearly a year. Then, when he drank only a glass of wine, dreaming not that he should again contract habits of drink, he became wild for more, and the terrible thirst increased until he was on the borders of delirium.

That Colonel Montague would be affected in the same manner, he did not doubt.

For some time Hank sat in the office, thinking over the affair; then he stole out into the yard, past the sleeping forms of the Wickfords, both of whom had been drinking much more than was usual with them, for the past two days.

Reaching the yard, Hank gave a hiss; and, in a moment, Antonio was at his side, saying in a whisper:

"Does the senior wish Antonio?"

"Yes," was the reply. "You are wakeful, I see; but both of my pards are asleep. Come into the house. I want you."

With these words Hank returned, followed by the Greaser. He then said:

"Antonio, bring that glass of brandy inside. I propose to get the liquor down the throat of our captive in some way; and, to be on the safe side, we will take no light into the room."

Opening the door noiselessly, the two men left it slightly open; enough light being cast into the room to enable them to distinguish objects.

The stupefied colonel was raised to nearly a sitting position, and the glass held to his lips. The muscles of his under jaw were lax, and slowly the brandy was poured into his mouth; those, who were administering the same, feeling the contortions, and hearing the gurgling produced by swallowing. Both were satisfied so far.

They then laid the colonel back on the pillows, Hank opening the door and bringing in a lighted candle.

He then said to Antonio:

"Now, we'll fix things for him, for he'll soon revive. It is not every man that has a regular spree prepared for him by others, and at their expense. What do you think?"

A smile was exchanged between the two conspirators at these words.

Placing a small table near to the bedside, Hank procured from the office three decanters, each nearly full of liquor of a different kind. He placed these upon the table with several glasses and a bowl of sugar, whispering to the Mexican, with another smile, as he did so:

"We can't afford to furnish water, so he'll be forced to take his drinks straight."

"Americanos have a strange way of avenging themselves upon their enemies," said the Greaser. "In Mexico we give them one stab, or choke them to death with a lasso."

"Yes, but when you wish to gain the gold of your enemy, you secure it first and kill him afterward. It would be poor revenge to stab a man to the heart, and he not know who killed him. This man will suffer ten thousand times more than if tortured by Apaches, before Wickford gets through with him."

"Do you know that he shot Wickford's arm so badly that it had to be cut off?"

"Caramba! It is not strange that Senor Wickford wants revenge. I should kill slow the man that would do that to me!"

The eyes of Antonio flashed as he spoke, and his hand clutched at his knife-handle.

"There," said Hank, "I believe all is fixed. He can't kill himself unless by drinking. Get another candle, Antonio, and stick it in that

tin source on the wall. I fancy, however, Colonel Montague won't need it much when he awakens.

"He won't know whether he's in Texas or in Patagonia. I'm gambling on that, heavy!"

"Now, I'll set this light on the table, and some extra candles alongside; for when day breaks this room will be as dark as Egypt. We made sure of that. There, all is serene."

"That liquor looks very inviting, and I am sure it will appear so to the colonel, for he will be thirsting for some when he opens his eyes, or I'm greatly mistaken."

"Come, Antonio, there is plenty of the ardent in the office for you and me; so you needn't look at it so longingly."

Both then left the room, Hank securing the door. The latter then produced a decanter, and bade the Greaser help himself.

"We'll drink and smoke awhile," he said, "and then put out our light. There are two peep-holes through which we can view our patient when necessary; but it will be one half-hour at least before he will come to any realization of his wants. I've diagnosed the case pretty well."

"If you are sleepy, Antonio, stretch out on that lounge, but I prefer to smoke."

"Thanks, senior. Antonio is doing well. The Americanos are very liberal."

"Proceed to enjoy yourself to the extent this establishment affords," said Hank, with a lordly air of hospitality. "But we must now keep silent, and await developments."

"Si, senior," returned the Mexican, in a low tone.

Thus they sat for quite half an hour, when both were startled by a deep groan of mingled agony and apprehension from the room adjoining.

At once Hank arose, and pointed to a chair which stood against the partition, intimating his desire that Antonio should take his position there. Then he blew out the candle.

The apartment was now quite dark, but a small arrow of light shot across the same from two holes in the partition, which were easily reached by standing on chairs.

A moment after, Antonio and Hank were peering in upon the victim of their cowardly plot.

Colonel Montague was now seated on his bed, evidently having gained that position after having become in a measure conscious.

His features expressed the wildest bewilderment, and most terrible mental suffering.

"If the old cuss hain't got the boss surprise-party of his life on hand now, I'm a liar!"

Thus muttered Hank to himself, exultantly.

The starting eyes of the colonel were glassy, and fixed in great perplexity upon the decanters of liquor.

Then he became filled with an eager longing, and he put out his hand, but instinctively drew it back and pressed his throbbing brow; evidently being unable to realize the past or present, and yet having a lingering consciousness of what he had suffered in the past through drink, and that warned him not to touch the contents of the decanters.

That the man's mind was in a most demoralized state the observers could see at once, and that he would give way to the intense thirst and longing for liquor they had no doubt.

Soon he sprang upward, standing between the bed and table; his powerful frame trembling from head to foot, his palms pressed tightly upon his brow and over his eyes. Then he lowered his quivering hands quickly, as if suddenly struck with a thought, and swept the apartment eagerly; but the same look of utter bewilderment again settled upon him, and his arms fell limp at his side, and his head settled upon his breast, as if he could no longer combat his lassitude.

The poor man's eyes rolled in their sockets, and again became fastened upon the decanters; but this was only for a moment. He sprang forward, clutched one, and wildly poured out a tumbler half-full of brandy. Then he placed it on the table, looking as though he hated it, but could not resist it. Clutching the glass, he held it between himself and the light of the candle, his teeth clinched and his eyes glaring wildly.

Soon the expression of his face changed to insane eagerness, and he raised the glass to his lips, drinking the brandy at a single gulp.

No sooner had the colonel swallowed the liquor, than Hank, carried away by his exultation, uttered an ejaculation of triumph. This caused Montague to start and gaze around, in the most profound surprise and apprehension; his senses most acute, in the then condition of his nerves.

Like a madman, he sprang to the door, and attempted to open it, but failed to do so. He then stalked about his prison, examining the walls; but not carefully, as his nervous state did not permit it.

Evidently as much perplexed as ever, yet unable to recall the near past, the colonel again drank some brandy; he then took up a cigar, and ignited it at the candle. Around the room,

he now stalked, like a maniac; striking his brow with his clinched fists, and beating the air.

His bloodshot eyes glared, like those of a wild beast. Even Antonio shuddered, as he looked at the maddened man; and Hank began to think that the prospect ahead, for subduing his victim were not so flattering. However, he hoped that the liquor would have a different effect, as more of it was drank; for he knew that the mind of the colonel was, at different times, ruled by almost opposite emotions.

For some time, Hank and Antonio watched the captive, who frequently strode to the table, and helped himself to brandy, both feeling sure that he was unable to understand his present position, or what had happened to him. Not even could the unhappy man now recall his home on the Guadalupe, and the years that he had passed there in happy sobriety and peace.

Without doubt, he had lost all realization of this; and, in his wild imaginings, was now back on the Colorado, with the unhappy past.

Hank stole out of doors, and awakened the Wickfords, father and son, conducting them to the two chairs he had placed at the partition.

James Wickford had slept off the effects of his over-indulgence; but, at the sight of his old foe, he could hardly suppress a cry of triumph. His teeth grated, his hands clinched, and his face contorted with a thirst for his long-delayed revenge.

His son was little less excited.

All were now confident that their programme, as arranged, could be carried out with success; that Colonel Montague would fall an easy prey to them. They became more sure of this, as their captive, at intervals, rushed eagerly to the table, and poured down the fiery liquor, through which his disgrace, ruin, and death were intended to be accomplished; and this, without his seeming to realize that he was the victim of enemies, his only thought appearing to be, that he might quench the terrible thirst, which grew more torturing as he drank—his brain becoming more and more demoralized and bewildered.

CHAPTER XIV.

A MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING.

WHEN Marietta Montague heard the sound of the flute, which she knew to be the same that Harold had fixed upon as a signal, she sprang to her feet, on the instant in her intense relief.

All her regret and grief vanished at once.

Thus she stood for a moment. Then she ran to the side of Pinto, and grasping the little bugle, blew a joyous welcome, that rippled through the arches of the bottom timber.

Returning to her former position, Marietta endeavored to assume an expression of offended love; but the effort was a failure, for her face was radiant, and her eyes filled with a light and joy that excluded all other feelings.

Soon the quick tramp of a horse on the bottom paths came to her ears, and the next moment the black steed sprang beneath the moss draped arch, and Harold Holmes was again by her side.

Doffing his sombrero, and bending gracefully forward in salutation, the young man said:

"Queen of my heart, and of the Guadalupe, I bend before your majesty, to thank you for the brave and daring act, which but now saved me from an ignominious death. I am your debtor for life, and happiness through life."

"I do not know if it is necessary for me to explain that my abrupt departure was prompted by a desire to drive from the minds of those rancheros any suspicions in regard to my entertaining a warm friendship for the daughter of Colonel Montague."

"Oh, Harold! I did not understand you."

"Did not? That is too bad, Marie."

"But do explain that horrible affair," urged the maiden. "Did they really send a messenger to my father this morning?"

"They did not," was the reply. "I saw your father."

"You, Harold! Where and when?"

"Seat yourself, Marie, and I will tell you."

The young man then related all the occurrences that had transpired since they had parted on the previous evening; the fair girl being astonished to learn that he had refrained from stating his object in shooting the beaves, until his life had been endangered, and also much concerned when she heard of the interview with her father.

"Oh, Harold!" she exclaimed, "my father will never forgive me, and I shall never forgive myself. Just to think that, through my not telling him, as I should have done, you came near dying an ignominious death! It drives me nearly insane. I could not have survived it, had those wretches effected their purpose."

"But, Harold, it was out of consideration for you that I delayed speaking of my adventure. I was about to inform papa several times, but he was so taken up with his proposed trip to Indianola, that I disliked to mar his joy."

"I knew he would be much excited about the peril I had passed, besides being much concerned generally. I also feared that, if I told my father, he would insist on my accompanying him to Indianola; and then you would have been disappointed and angry, and would have

gone away without seeing me. I felt dreadfully.

"And I feel treacherous and undutiful now, Harold, and deceitful also, for not having told papa, and for being glad that he was going away. I have always confided in him, in everything; and I do not wonder that he disbelieved your statement. For he must have done so, otherwise he would be greatly incensed and worried."

"I tremble to think of his return. I fear that he may insult you. Not that he will not be most grateful for your having saved my life; but he will think you an adventurer, who is seeking to win his daughter, and he will be terribly angry. He may even offer you money for your services."

Harold had made no attempt to interrupt Marietta throughout. When she ceased, he spoke words calculated to reassure her.

"My dear girl," he said, "compose yourself! I am quite certain you are borrowing trouble. I was satisfied that you had very good reasons for not informing your father; but as my life hung upon it at the time, I was naturally just a little indignant. That is all."

"It is past now, and there is no occasion for worry. The same kind fate that led me to the ford to save you, and led you also in time to save myself, will control our destinies in the future. Of this I have no doubt."

"As long as we love each other, as we now do, no man nor men shall keep us asunder! Bear this in mind, Marie. I am one who has a will of iron. I fear no man; and I allow nothing to come between me and duty, or affection. All will be well, if we trust implicitly in each other. And now, I can linger no longer."

"Remember that I am a trespasser on your father's domains, and a thief also, for I have stolen the heart of his only child. I am conscious, for the first time in my life, that I am a villain of the first water."

Harold Holmes felt the greatest reluctance in parting, for the time being, from the maiden whom he had vowed that he would win as his wife.

But, he had spent years in seeking revenge for a loved sister's ruin and death, and had sworn to allow nothing to come between him and his revenge. He saw, now for the first time, how strong was the love that enslaved him.

Yet the thirst for revenge was never lost sight of, and he now felt that it was his duty to confide in the trusting maiden, who, he felt assured, would keep naught a secret from him.

"Marie, darling," he said, "I fear you will be ill. You must have time to recover your usual state of mind, alone. I regret that my appearance has changed your happy and quiet life, to one of excitement and misery."

"Yet, what is to be, will be. Let us, as I have said, hope and trust for better days. If you will permit me, however, I will tell you something of myself, and of what has been my ruling desire for years; in fact, that which has brought me to Texas."

"It is neither more nor less than a thirst for revenge, that is only surpassed in intensity by the new-born passion that I feel for you."

Nothing could be more interesting to the beautiful and trusting girl, than to hear, from the lips of Harold, something connected with his past life. Naturally she longed for his confidence.

"I am," he began, "the son of a planter in Florida—Hudson Holmes by name—but my parents both died when I was very young."

"I had no brother, and but one sister, Hortense, who was a year older than myself. My father's will left all his property, real and personal, to myself and sister. The plantation and effects were to be sold and the proceeds invested for us by an old friend of my father's."

"When fourteen years of age, I was parted from my sister, and sent to a boarding-school; two and a half years being spent thus. My sister was sent at the same time, to a seminary for young ladies; and we did not meet, except at long intervals, during our school days."

"Our guardian had arranged that we should pass our vacations at the home of a widow lady, near our own; having, in this, as he pretended, our happiness in view. As time proved, however, this was but a plan of the one whom my father had trusted, to keep us from his own house, where we would have learned his true character."

"When I had finished my studies, I was advised by letter, to make a tour of Europe, then return and choose the life that suited me."

"A check for quite a large amount was inclosed; and, as Hortense was to make her home with the lady I have mentioned until my return I was delighted at the prospect before me."

"My sister was a beautiful girl, and we loved each other devotedly. We parted, and I was afterward conscious of an inward monitor that prompted me to give up my project, and remain. Would to God that I had done so!"

"I traveled in Europe for nearly a year, receiving in all that time but two letters from my sister, and those soon after my arrival in London. I began to fear, I knew not what."

"Judge of my amazement to find on my return, that our guardian had removed Hortense

from the home at which I had left her, and that nothing was known of her whereabouts. I hastened to New Orleans, and there found that he had taken to drinking and gambling some years before, had squandered his fortune, and probably that of my sister and myself."

"I will not tax your patience further on this sad subject. I may say, however, that a considerable sum of money had been left us by our mother, and this was in the hands of a lawyer, who assisted me in my search for Hortense. With the aid of detectives, I ascertained, beyond a doubt, that our guardian had bribed a ruffian to escort my sister to New Orleans; deceiving her into the belief that I had arrived there, and was too ill to write."

"This dastard had been paid to make way with her, but the affair becoming known to another gambler, he formed a counter-plot, believing he could gain the residue of my sister's property, by saving her from her ruffianly escort, and then persuading her that I was dead."

"Finding that her fortune had been squandered, this villain deceived the poor girl by a mock marriage; and, while on a trip up the Mississippi, and drinking heavily, he revealed to her his perfidy. She then, convinced that the announcement of my death was false also, and rendered frantic, demanded justice, asserting that she would advertise for me. That sealed her doom."

"Insane with fright and drink combined, the cowardly assassin struck her to the state-room floor, and then threw her from the window into the dark waters!"

The young man trembled in the intensity of his feelings, but presently went on.

"All this I learned from one of the associates of the dastard, to whom he had told the terrible facts, when intoxicated. I then swore that I would track the destroyer of my sister to the uttermost ends of the earth, if need be, and avenge her. That was two years ago, Marie; and I have ever since been in pursuit of him."

"Both these miscreants shall feel my vengeance yet. I am not discouraged. I will find them, if I spend my whole life in the search. I feel, however, that success is at hand, and that I am near at the end of my trail. Still, I go on, influenced by I know not what."

"I see Hortense in my dreams, urging me on. I see her waking—yes, I go, Hortense!" he exclaimed, springing suddenly to his feet—"I will hasten on, and linger not."

Such was the intense emotion of the young man, that he seemed even to forget the presence of his fair companion. His strong form swayed for a moment back and forth; but at length, he straightened himself, and stood firm as a rock.

"Oh, Harold!" cried the girl; "bear me! I love you, and if it is in my power, I will assist you. Such miscreants must feel the hand of retribution, and you would be less than man if you sought not to avenge your sister's murder. But why was not this wretch brought to justice?"

Harold was himself in an instant.

"He stole from the boat," he replied, "at the next landing. It was night, and the crime was not discovered until morning. All this I learned."

"But, Marie, I must now say good-by, for a time. Excited as I am now, I must ride or go insane. I must visit Victoria and other towns. I cannot neglect my search, even for a single day. I feel that I am soon to find, not only him but my father's perfidious friend, who was the first cause of it all."

"Oh, Harold! Must you go?"

"When next you hear my flute, Marie, you will have told your father all. I can meet him then, and prove my worthiness in every respect."

"Do not leave me until to-morrow at least!"

"Urge me not from my path of duty, from my sworn revenge!" was the reply. "Think of my beautiful sister and her fate!"

"Forgive my selfishness, Harold; but tell me, when shall I look for your return?"

"Within three days, my darling; I am not sure—it may be sooner. Your father, too, will have returned by that time."

"And I dread his return, Harold."

"Cheer up, darling! A wise Providence has brought us together for good or evil. Let us hope it may be for good."

"Farewell, Marie! When the sun shall have kissed your cheeks twice after to-day, it will be my turn again!"

One close embrace, one long and lingering kiss and Harold Holmes sprang upon his horse and dashed toward the ford.

A few moments after the sound of his flute in farewell, sounded from beyond the Guadalupe, and the bugle responded.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PLOT THICKENS.

THE Wickfords, with Hank and Antonio, after viewing the singular and insane actions of their victim in his prison-room, from which he made no attempt to escape after his first effort, all stole noiselessly out into the open air; retiring some distance from the dwelling, far enough not to be overheard in what they had to say to each other.

James Wickford was extravagantly jubilant and began wringing the hands of Hank and Antonio in his excess of glee and gratitude. As soon as they had reached a safe point, being careful not to expose themselves to view in the moonlit spaces between the shrubbery, the elder Wickford exclaimed:

"Pards, everything goes smooth! We have been remarkably successful. Antonio's dexterity, and your cunning, Hank, have insured the carrying out of our plot. Had it not been for you, all would have gone wrong; for I admit, that during the torturing suspense occasioned by your seeming uncalled-for absence, I drank too much. Will, too, is quite too impetuous and rash to have to work the affair at the start. But it is all right, now."

"I am on the sure road to gain my long-delayed revenge; and all of us will profit largely by this, the main venture of my life."

"It has all gone favorable so far," admitted Hank; "but we are in a dangerous position. You must bear in mind that the colonel is a prominent man in his own section, and that he must not be absent an unreasonable length of time, or we will be caught with him in our power."

"In the first place, how are we to get his paper cashed?"

"I have thought of that," returned Jim Wickford. "It has got to be worked fine, and Will comes into the business on that deal. I don't suppose—in fact I am very sure—that he doesn't deposit to any amount."

"His cotton crop can be sold right here, on his order, Will disposing of it, and giving a written guarantee to have it delivered within thirty days."

"Then we can get bills of sale from him for his negroes, and take them before he gets home. We did not write for him to bring any capital for investment, for fear he would suspect something wrong; and, for that very reason, he is just the man to have brought all his ready cash along. Then we can take a heavy mortgage on his estate; but that may not profit us. It will depend upon how we succeed with him. At all events, his cash and cotton, and niggers will be a big haul; and we'll run him from his home in some way, never fear."

"I intend to play with him as a cat does with a mouse. We'll abduct the daughter—in fact, we will all run up to the Guadalupe, as soon as we have 'skinned' him clean. Then I shall make myself known to him, and shall prove that I have not forgotten my sworn revenge. How does that suit you?"

"If Senor Montague's horse is seen here," put in Antonio, "it may lead his friends on our track."

"By George, you're right!" agreed Hank, quickly. "Antonio, can't you smuggle the animal toward the Rio Grande. We'll make you a present of the beast. What say you, Jim and Will?"

"Certainly! By all means. We must keep ourselves on the safe side," said James. "We'd be in a bad fix, if any one came in search of the old cuss, and his horse had been seen in our possession. Get rid of the nag and equipments this very night, Antonio!"

"All right, senors! I have a friend in this town who will start at once, if I go halves for what he can sell the animal for on the Rio Bravo."

"Then hunt your man up at once, if he can be depended upon," ordered Hank. "He must be as secret as the grave, now and henceforth."

The Mexican stole away immediately on his mission.

"Will," added Hank, "what makes you so silent and glum? Your interest seems to have abated somewhat."

"I am as eager as ever," answered the younger man, impatiently; "but I don't like this slow business. If that man had given me as much cause to hate him as he has my father, I would go right in and kill him like a dog—banged if I wouldn't!"

"That would be no revenge at all," returned his father. "Do you think a sudden death would pay me for the loss of my right arm? No! I shall torture him, body and mind, and cause him to curse the day he was born, before I kill him."

"There is where you go back on the Wickford blood. You have had schooling enough in this business, Will, to appreciate our proceedings thus far."

"I understand all that, father; but he's a giant in strength, and he may yet escape us. You will then regret not having killed him when you had him in your power."

"He shall not escape, Will! It is impossible. You have seen, that the liquor, and that drug, have so demoralized his brain, that it is a question if he realizes his position, or has the least thought of his home and daughter. Go back and see what he is now doing. I dare not trust myself to look in upon him, lest I should lose myself-control, and reveal myself by taunting him of the past."

Will obeyed immediately, and no sooner had he gone from ear-shot, than his father said, quickly:

"Hank, I had a terrible dream, last night, and I am feeling fearfully nervous in consequence."

"What was the subject of your dream?"

"That old scrape became revived in my mind, from seeing you so convulsed with terror, at my casual mention of that girl of yours. She must have been different from your other victims, or you would not have been so much affected by it."

"What was her name? And did you really give her a 'send-off,' as was reported? I haven't seen you alone, since you joined us, except when other matters were on my mind."

Had it not been dark where they were standing, Jim Wickford would have seen that Hank's face was as ghastly now as on the previous occasion. It was some little time before he could recover himself. Then he spoke, but in a hoarse, unnatural voice.

"Jim Wickford, don't mention that girl again! I am not in the habit of throwing up things at you, or I might ask, where is the fortune that was once left you in trust? Let bygones be bygones."

"It does not matter who the girl was; but I admit that I put her out of the way, and she has haunted me ever since!"

It was now Wickford's turn to gasp for breath; but he soon recovered himself, saying in a strange voice:

"Blast it, Hank! You're cross. I meant nothing, and I don't care a cuss, who the girl was, or whether you killed her or not. It is strange, however, that you alluded to that Holmes affair; for they were in my mind. That Harold, whom I sent to Europe, was a very intelligent youth, and full of fire and vim—hang'd if he wasn't!"

"What if he yet lives, and is on my track? I dreamt that this was so, and that he came up with me; and, after accusing me of the murder of his sister, stabbed me! I felt his knife pierce my vitals, and I awoke in horror; big drops of perspiration starting from every pore."

"It puzzles me, and causes me not only to think that he is really on my track, but that the girl was murdered by that Dudley, whom I hired to conduct her to New York, and to get her lost in that metropolis. It must have been so."

"From the very time that I concocted a scheme to appropriate the fortune that Holmes left in trust with me, luck changed; and although I had made a handsome stake by investing to advantage the money of those children, and could have returned to them, intact, their own with interest; outside of this handsome amount, all went except the principal that had been intrusted to me. Even my own personal property was lost. I was tempted and fell!"

"I had never before been guilty of defrauding any one, except by a trick with the cards, now and then; but a demon seemed to possess me from the moment that I planned to wrong the orphans of Hudson Holmes."

"Since then, I have been desperate, and have been never more satisfied than when defrauding others. I have drugged, and even killed men, when they were helpless with drink; and I never have felt the least qualms of conscience, until that dream, last night."

"Now, I would give much to know if the girl and boy are alive. If I knew that Hortense had been foully dealt with, I would shoot the man as quick as I would a rattlesnake. It was enough that she was left an orphan, and her fortune stolen; besides, I had no motive—no call for revenge on them."

"Each of them had a small fortune, left by their mother. It was in good hands, if they knew enough to secure it."

"What's that? A small fortune, that you had nothing to do with?" asked Hank, in some excitement.

"Yes; and held by a New Orleans lawyer."

Had Wickford been able to observe the face of Hank, he would have seen that he was greatly agitated, and filled with rage and self-condemnation.

"By all the gods!" was Hank's mental communing; "I believe he would kill me, if he knew all. But, he'll never know! Fool that I was, not to have found out all the family history, and coaxed that money from her!"

"Wickford, you played a losing game. You ought to have kept in with the girl and boy, and got everything."

"I regret the whole affair now," was the reply; "for I begin to fear that boy will hunt me to my death, and I cannot blame him. But, Hank, don't ever mention a word of this to Will. He knows nothing of it."

"No fear of my cutting my own throat; but it seems you are not very close in giving him a clean bill of my doings. I'll bet a hat, he believes me a woman-slayer already! Don't let us have any more of that."

"I beg pardon, Hank! It was a slip of the tongue. I have had too much brandy on board, since we have been here."

"I observe that you are very regretful at times, Jim; but it is all sham, for I know you to be capable of any crime. But I don't believe either of these orphans is alive."

"I tell you, Hank, I am positive of it! A man doesn't dream as I did for nothing."

"Except when he's full of whisky! But here comes Will!"

Young Wickford, at this moment joined his father and Hank, at the same time, exclaiming:

"All's well! Our captive has thrown himself upon the bed, and is snoring like a fat hog."

"That's good!" said Hank, much relieved. "We'll all turn in for the remainder of the night, and be ready for energetic biz in the morning."

"Antonio will see that the horse is taken away, and will also keep an eye out around the house. The colonel will wake up, and start to drinking; and then we'll have him under our thumb."

All agreed to Hank's proposal, and soon the conspirators were fast asleep.

CHAPTER XVI.

GETTING TO WORK.

"I see the blind, and go one thousand dollars better. I'll take the cards!"

Thus said Hank Hodge, he being seated at the table in the office, Will Wickford and Antonio occupying positions at the same, and employed, as one may infer from Hank's remark, at poker.

Antonio was gotten up quite smartly, in the costume of a well-to-do ranchero of the Rio Grande.

Near the table was a small stand, upon which was spread a lunch, with cigars, decanters and glasses.

The side furthest from the door of the room occupied by Colonel Montague was vacant, and directly over it was a small hole through which peeped James Wickford, as he lay upon the floor of the attic.

Between two boards near him was at times thrust a card, a wink from Hank giving to Jim the signal that it had been noticed and should be withdrawn.

"I shall 'stay in,' and draw three cards," said Will, boisterously. "Senor Garcia, what do you say?"

The Mexican answered by placing ten one-hundred-dollar bills on the Bank of New Orleans in the "pot."

"This is getting interesting," said Will, as he discarded and picked up the pack. "How many cards, Garcia?"

"One, senor," said Antonio, laconically.

"One can tell nothing of a man's hand by the number of paste-boards drawn," asserted Will. "The secret of the game is, to keep cool and not get excited!"

Will emphasized the last words, looking fixedly at Antonio, who, both he and Hank feared would in some manner spoil their plans.

The outer door, as well as the closed board shutters of the windows, were closed tightly, and although the sun was shining brightly without, several candles were burning in the room.

One could not have told whether it was day or night.

Thus the game proceeded—a mere farce, of course.

The door into the colonel's prison had been unlocked, and these preparations made noiselessly while he slept, Antonio having returned with the friend of whom he had spoken, and sent the horse and equipments away.

At the first loud words of Hank, Colonel Montague sprung from the pillow to a sitting posture. His eyes were bloodshot and glaring, and he looked the picture of bewilderment, being unable to recall the near past.

A burning thirst tormented him, and a longing for stimulants which was beyond his control.

He listened a moment, the sounds being very plain to his acute hearing, and the familiar words transporting him back to other days; but though they seemed to come from the adjoining room, the little he could bring to mind had no more reality to him than a dream.

However, his all-consuming desire for drink banished after the first moment, all consideration of or for them; and his eyes swept the apartment with a lightning-like look of longing.

The decanters caught his gaze, and he sprung from the bed, clutching the brandy, and trembling with nervous eagerness, while he poured out a glass nearly full of the fiery liquor and drank it quickly. Then, with panther-like step, he approached the door that opened into the next room.

There he stood, listening intently to every word, so familiar in the long ago. His position was a puzzling mystery to him, and the anxiety which he would have felt in regard to himself, his business and his home was not only blunted, but almost thrust into the background, and by the liquor which had benumbed his brain and demoralized his faculties.

His all-engrossing desire was now to drink more, and thus allay the thirst that burned at his vitals.

Not long did he linger at the door, but returned to the table. He had not drunk enough as yet to calm his nerves, but the chances were that his second bout of drinking would not

plunge him into such a wild whirl as did the first.

Three times in fifteen minutes did the colonel tip the decanter. Then choosing a cigar with the air of a connoisseur he ignited the same and began placidly puffing it. Having been for a long time—in fact for twenty-four hours—without food, it was a wonder that, with the brandy he had drank, he bore up as he did.

Pouring down one more glass Colonel Montague strode to the door, clutched the handle and braced himself for a herculean effort to burst his way into the next room, he having discovered that his knife and revolver had been taken from him, which fact gave him apprehension. To his surprise the door flew open and he staggered into the next apartment.

Prepared for the scene before him, the colonel was not in any way surprised. He clutched at the back of a chair to use it for a weapon of defense, the first thing as he entered the room.

His reception was as bewildering a surprise to him as had been his singular imprisonment, for he had made up his mind that he had been foully dealt with, although unable to account for the fact that his money was still safe in his breast-pocket.

That his captors had treated him in so hospitable a manner was also a mystery, as well as was the manner in which they had gotten him in their power.

No sooner did the colonel show himself in the open doorway than Hank, Will and Antonio all sprung to their feet, seemingly much relieved. They were prepared for the advent of their victim, having heard his stealthy movements, for he was not careful of causing a noise when he last approached the door.

"Well! well!" shouted Hank, jubilantly; "this is an agreeable surprise, Colonel Montague!" extending his hand. "I welcome you back to the enjoyment of real life. We are rejoiced that you have recovered."

"Allow me to introduce myself and friends. My name is Hodge; this is your recent correspondent, Mr. Wales, and this is Senor Garcia."

All warmly congratulated the colonel upon his speedy recovery, and the victim of their plot gazed at them in the utmost bewilderment, his indignation and apprehension vanishing before their warm greeting.

Hank kept up a run of words however.

"All this must be explained to you, I see, Colonel Montague. Seat yourself. But I forgot—we must first have a friendly drink all around. Then we can talk. I hope you will excuse our hilarity, but we did not suppose we would disturb you."

The colonel moved and acted as if in a somnambulist state, striving to recall what he had known or heard of the name of Wales. The letter which he had received had been entirely forgotten.

"Colonel Montague," said Will, in the most polite manner, as he poured out his liquor. "I regret very much that I have been the indirect means of causing you this most unfortunate and unexpected misfortune; but I trust that all will be well with us directly, when matters have been fully explained. You have good cause to be bewildered and astonished, I admit."

"That'll do, Mr. Wales," put in Hank. "We'll drink first and explain later on. Your very good health, sir!"

"Same here," said Wales.

"Same, senor," said Garcia; with the addition that he trusted they would be better acquainted.

All drank, when Hank passed the cigars, saying:

"Take a fresh weed, colonel! Then we'll seat ourselves comfortably for a chat. We've been having a little game of cards; and after explaining the singular manner in which we found you we will resume it, with your permission, for I am a heavy loser as the game has been running. You can look on and rest and compose yourself."

"By the way, let me examine your head, colonel! Ah! I see the swelling has decreased considerably."

Although prepared, when he entered the room, to demand an explanation of his unaccountable presence and condition, and to force his way from the dwelling, if necessary, the welcome he had received, and the words addressed to him, completely changed his mind. He was forced into the belief that he owed these strangers much—possibly his life.

The trio now seated themselves, in a matter-of-fact manner, at the table, and began to argue, and to figure up on winnings and losses.

"See here, Wales!" said Hank, "I've lost six niggers—all good field hands—and the ready money guaranteed to you on our last night's winnings."

"I'll be obliged to raise on this year's crops if I don't get a run of good cards and get square again. I'm eager for revenge, I can tell you. Garcia, how do you stand? Ahead, are you not?"

"About five hundred pesos, senor," said the Mexican carelessly, as he rolled a cigarette.

"Gentlemen," said the colonel, as he seated

himself, "I admit that I should have asked you to defer your game until you had given me some idea of who I am, where I am, and how I got here."

"I must say that everything seems sadly mixed up to me, and very decidedly cloudy."

All burst out into hearty laughter at this; but Colonel Montague's face betrayed no such emotion.

The question in his mind, or series of questions, being evidently of too much moment to admit of mirth.

"I observe, colonel," said Wales, with a manner of seeming satisfaction, "that you have, in a measure, recovered. You must excuse me for not having at once given you an explanation; but I really was unable to judge, as you entered the office, whether your mind was in a state to comprehend it."

"You recollect, do you not, that I wrote you a letter from the Casimir House? You received it and hastened on horseback to meet me at Indianola."

The colonel inclined forward, his head braced by his arms, and his hands clasped over his eyes, as if in deep thought.

"Yes!" he exclaimed at last. "I do remember it."

"Well, Colonel Montague, that letter was the means of our knowing who you were. It was in your pocket when we found you, where you lay."

"Found me? What do you mean, Mr. Wales?"

"I must ask you, colonel, if you remember the 'Cart War,' which was waged some years ago?"

"I do, sir; perfectly well."

"Well, there was a fight between the Mexican and Texan teamsters, last night; and we, becoming anxious, and fearing that perhaps you had set out to meet me, proceeded on horseback to ascertain the progress of affairs, and if you were to be seen."

"We found you, senseless, on the bank of Chocolate Creek, where you had evidently been thrown from your horse; but the animal could not be found. It is probable that some Mexican lassoed you, to obtain your horse, and was in too much of a hurry to search your person. Having an idea that you might be the man I had written to, I took from your side-pocket a letter to ascertain if possible, and it was my own epistle. Then we brought you here, and did what we could for you."

"We had great trouble in getting you asleep, after you were aroused from your stupor. This was owing to the fact that you insisted on swallowing a large quantity of brandy. You have slept, however, a long time."

"Now, you know the whole story; and, let me say again, that I regret exceedingly having been the cause of your misfortune. However, when you have fully recovered, we will talk business."

"I will see that you have as good a horse and equipments as you have lost; even though we fail to come to an agreement as regards what I proposed in my letter. Now, Colonel Montague, you know all that we do, and I hope we understand each other."

"God bless you, gentlemen!" said the colonel, as he grasped a hand of each in turn. "You have relieved my mind from a heavy load. My brain has been in a sad state. I have drunk no intoxicants for years, and what I have lately swallowed has added to the effects of my fall. I am not quite right yet."

"Make yourself perfectly at home here, colonel," said Wales. "Help yourself to anything you like. I think we'll all take another round, and start our game square again."

"I'm agreeable," said Hank, quickly. "I am glad the colonel is so much better. I almost feared he would have a long siege of it."

"I too congratulate you, senior colonel," said Garcia, "upon being so improved, and hope you will soon be yourself again."

All filled their glasses, and drank again together. They then seated themselves, and continued their game; not asking the colonel to join them, for they wished the proposal to come from him.

They had no doubt that he would be eager to play, after he had, for a time, watched the progress of the game.

CHAPTER XVII.

SUCCESS OF THE PLOT.

COLONEL MONTAGUE sat for some time, watching the game of cards and studying the faces, words, and manner of the three men before him. The fourth—his most bitter enemy—of whose existence he was ignorant, was looking down upon him all this time with the expression of a fiend.

First Hank, and then "Wales" proposed drinks again, and the colonel made no objection to joining them; just the opposite indeed, for he appeared eager to have the opportunity of indulging.

Thus matters proceeded, until the colonel, satisfied that he was in the company of gentlemen, could no longer resist the desire to plunge into the excitement of gaming, from which he had so long refrained.

Little thought gave he of home, or of Marietta, and if perchance he did, he reasoned that all was well. He felt that bright prospects were before him.

Wales staked large amounts, as did all, giving their notes, and bills of sale of slaves, besides borrowing upon the strength of the next season's crop, purporting, as they did, to own large plantations on the Trinity river. But it is not necessary to detail in this place the progress of the game.

The colonel played and drank incessantly for hours, James Wickford watching his cards from above, and informing his co-conspirators. His belt of arms lay on a chair near him, and he had noticed the same upon entering the office. At first this went far to reassure him in regard to the character of those upon whose hospitality he was for the time dependent; but he left the weapons where they were, there being no occasion for him to do otherwise.

Indeed, there was throughout no cause why he should become offended or belligerent. There was no sign of cheating.

A most uncommon run of luck Hank seemed to have, which nearly drove the colonel insane; but the influence of the liquor filled him with a desire to continue, believing that he could easily win back what he had lost.

He had some ten thousand dollars in cash with him, which he had intended, if everything was satisfactory, to add to the capital of the proposed firm.

This was all lost. He then gave a bill of sale for his estimated cotton crop. Fifteen field hands were next played for, one after the other, and lost, as a matter of course. Then Colonel Montague exclaimed:

"I've lost enough for one night, and it is the longest night I ever passed. I'll play no more! I wish I had been sensible enough to quit when you did," addressing Garcia and Wales. "Mr. Hodge has, I must say, the most remarkable run of cards I have ever known. I declare, I feel very strange and upset."

"I have overtaxed my mind, and I am a little off balance by drink, which I am not accustomed to. I think I'll retire, with your permission, for I am really far from well. I trust I do not inconvenience you."

"Mr. Wales, to-morrow we will attend to business."

"A good idea, colonel! I never had such a run of bad-luck," returned Will. "Let us all have a drink and then retire. I'll sleep on this lounge. Mr. Garcia and Mr. Hodge have not far to go to reach their lodgings."

Just before the game closed, "Wales" had dropped a small powder into the glass which the colonel had been using; and at his invitation, all went to the stand, each taking his own glass with him.

All could see that their victim had much on his mind, and they feared an outburst, or a declaration of suspicion in regard to their character and object. But Colonel Montague drank quickly, bade all good-night, and leaving his belt, entered the adjoining room, and cast himself, with a groan, on the bed.

In five minutes more, the colonel was fast asleep, and James Wickford hastened from his uncomfortable position in the attic, to join his fellow-plotters. The quartette then seated themselves around the table, and conversed in whispers, while they examined the notes and bills of sale that had been given by Montague.

"Now to more lively business!" exclaimed Jim. "Antonio, saddle all the horses, and get an extra animal, with equipments, as soon as possible, even if you are obliged to steal it. I shall make you a present of all that is in the house, after we leave it. Hurry up! A great deal depends now on quick work!"

The Greaser departed, without a word. As soon as he had gone, Jim Wickford added:

"Now, Will, you and Hank understand that these papers are not worth the ink they are written with, unless they are used at once. Before the old cuss reaches his home, we must have his cotton and niggers. These will hold good with his overseer."

"Will, you must get that check cashed at Victoria, in some way—I am at a loss to know how—but you will probably fall in with some one who knows us. I don't care a cuss, after we get what we want, about suspicions in regard to us; for our word is better than his—three against one—that we won his money fair and square."

"He's a bigger fool than he used to be, but the brandy knocked him out of all reason. How long will he sleep, Hank? Until morning, think you?"

"Probably. I wish I was asleep now."

"No sleep for us to-night, boys," said Jim, firmly. "In the first place, we must get him on a horse, and take him beyond Chocolate Creek. There, we will leave him on the ground, with the lariat tied to a mesquite; so he can have the horse to ride, or he'll wander around, get into Indianola, and then the very devil will be to pay."

"He doesn't as yet, know exactly where he is; and I expected, every minute, to hear him ask."

"As soon as we get rid of him, we'll all gallop

to Victoria, avoiding the wagon-trains, and strike in north of the town, on the Guadalupe. That is our basis of operation next, and we've got to keep our eyes skinned. The niggers must be got away in such a manner that no one will be able to say which way we have gone."

"The cotton can be run in to Indianola, and disposed of to a man I know, who will be ready to receive it, and dispute all other claims. I'll ride in, and see him to-night, explaining everything."

"All planned admirably, if we can carry things through," said Hank. "Those are all the niggers he's got, except wenches and young ones, isn't it?"

"Yes, and it will break him up; but there's worse ahead for him. It was all I could do to control myself up there. I wanted to steal down and put a knife into him. You are all fine actors, and Antonio fairly astonished me, I must say."

"But to business. Hank, put a bottle of brandy in the old fellow's saddle-bags—for he'll die on the track without it—and his weapons must be buckled around him. I'll go at once and see my cotton-buyer. He's at the Casimir House."

Soon everything was arranged.

The colonel was examined, rolled over and over roughly, but gave no evidence of being awakened.

Then he was borne out by the trio, and placed upon the horse that Antonio had procured, and secured to the saddle; his arms being buckled about his waist, and a bottle of whisky put in his saddle-bags.

As soon as this was accomplished, the elder Wickford appeared, proclaiming that all was right.

Then the candles in the little dwelling were extinguished, the doors secured, and the key hidden under the log door-step. All was now ready.

The quartette of villains, with their victim, at once proceeded through the darkness—the moon being somewhat obscured with a thick haze—on the same course that they had pursued, when they conveyed the senseless colonel to their retreat, at the first.

Senseless he was now, but it was a blessed condition compared with what was to be his awakening.

On through the mesquites in a winding course the villains and their victim proceeded. Not a word was spoken. Antonio was in advance, on the lookout for any camp or wagons. Soon they reached the north bank, half a mile above, and on the border of the vast plain that stretched to Victoria on the northwest.

There they cut the bonds which bound the colonel to his saddle, took him off the horse, and laid him upon the sward, banging the saddle-bags upon a branch over his head. Securing the end of the neck-rope of the horse to a stump near by, without removing the bridle, they sat on their steeds for a moment, laughing with most exultant glee at the success thus far of their plans. The ghastly face of the colonel was now shown distinctly in the moonlight, like that of a corpse.

"Farewell, Maurice Montague!" said James Wickford, his features perfectly demoniac in their expression. "You had a surprise-party beyond at the house, and you'll have another here when you awaken. But the most surprising surprise that you shall experience—and I swear it!—is yet to come."

Whirling his horse without a word further, he joined his companions, and the quartette of unmitigated scoundrels shot over the prairie toward Victoria, keeping far to the north of the wagon-road and the line of camps.

CHAPTER XVIII.

RETURNING HOME.

THE scorching sun shot its hot rays down through the thin foliage of the Chocolate Creek mesquites, upon the ghastly features of Colonel Montague.

Slowly his lids opened, but to close at once, as if ashamed to look upon the bright sunlight; as if, as his countenance betrayed, he felt like a guilty thing, unfit even to live.

His sense of thought came to him before he opened his eyes, and brought with it a sense of the most poignant misery. He remembered that he had lost all except his lands. That he had defrauded his only child of her birthright, and disgraced himself forever.

He scarce seemed to realize that he had been in some way removed from a bed to where he was. He felt only that he had sacrificed his fortune and his self-respect. Ten thousand times worse, indeed; for he had lost her patrimony, the wealth of his darling; that represented her comfort when he was gone—when he could no longer provide for her.

Better, far better, that he had died. Wealth without him, was much to be preferred to poverty with him.

Thus he thought in his wretchedness, seeming to have been defrauded of all that he had owned—all that he had labored for since he left the Colorado!

Thus he lay, helpless with the weakness and the deathly sickness that was born of these prostrating thoughts. For a long time he remained in this state of abject misery; cursing himself and those who had caused his fall. He was in as torturing agony of mind and body as one could be, and yet live. His appetite, too, this new craving for strong drink, was terrible.

Suddenly, as if his great mental struggle could be borne no longer, he again opened his eyes, now almost blinded by the sun—which at first he believed to be the candle-light of the room in which he had fallen asleep—and fixed them upon the brazen sky and the intervening scant foliage of the mesquites. Where was he? What dread thing had befallen him since he threw himself upon that bed in the house of Mr. Wyman Wales?

Instantly it occurred to him that he had been duped; that the letter from Wales had been a decoy—that he had been lured to Indianola for the express purpose of being fleeced? It must be so!

He had been waylaid by the very villains who had won his money, slaves, and cotton! Well he remembered having given bills of sale, orders, and a check on the bank; and this had caused him poignant misery, being the first glaring fact that flashed upon his mind when he awoke.

Who were they? Could his conclusions be correct in regard to the character of these men?

Yes; they must have known of him years before, and of his failing when under the influence of drink. They must have known that he had vowed never to drink or play more, and that he had prospered since his removal to the Guadalupe.

If this was not so, they would not have thus plotted to decoy him from home, waylaid him, and—as he was now confident—drugged him, to get him completely in their power.

He now strove to think of any one who could have an object for this, outside of gain; but he could think of none, except his old enemy, James Wickford, who, as far as he knew, was not living.

Then, too, Wickford had but one arm.

Struggling to arise, and falling back, trembling like a man stricken with palsy, the colonel groaned like one in a violent death-spasm. At last, he gained a sitting posture, and then perceived a saddled horse near him, and also the saddle-bags.

No longer was he in any doubt in regard to his position, or the character of the men who had been so extremely hospitable, and lucky at cards.

They had contrived and executed well, procuring a horse and equipments, and conveying him from the house to the mesquites, in order that he would not have the opportunity of exposing them. They had drugged him, or he would have awakened. Of this he felt positive; and he now believed that he had passed nearly two nights and a day in their den—they keeping candles lit through the day.

He had been an ass to be so easily duped, but he knew that his brain had been in such a condition that he was incapable of reasoning.

He had not the remotest idea where the house, to which he had been taken, was situated; but he believed it could not be far from Indianola.

Looking out from the mesquites, and taking notice of the sun, he felt sure that he was on the edge of Victoria Prairie. He was near the Chocolate Creek; and he knew not what to do, or where to go.

Marietta would expect him home that night, or the next morning; and he would rather die than meet her, yet he must, although he could say nothing to excuse his terrible fall and loss.

He strove again to arise to his feet, but in vain. His craving for liquor had become almost maddening; and he knew, that if he attempted to ride on to Victoria without stimulants, he would die, a raving maniac, on the way.

His glance wandered from the horse to the saddle-bags, and he gave a hoarse shout of joy, for he saw the neck of a bottle protruding from them.

By a Herculean effort he struggled to his feet. Grasping the neck of the bottle, he twitched it from the bags, trembling with nervous weakness, and the apprehension that it might be empty, and had been placed there by his enemies, in mockery of what they knew he must endure.

The weight of the bottle relieved him. There was something in it—that much was certain—but was that something the liquor necessary to quench this thirst that was consuming him?

Sinking again to the earth, his parched lips quivering, his eyes glaring like those of a wild beast, with insane eagerness, Colonel Montague pulled out the cork, and raised the bottle to his nose.

"Thank God!" burst from his lips. "I am saved! I'd drink now, if I knew it would kill me within the hour. Oh, what will become of me! I can no longer resist temptation."

The poor man took a long draught, and for

some moments sat waiting for the liquor to give him strength; soon drinking again, and then recorking the bottle, and putting it away.

At once, a new train of thoughts seemed to pass through his mind. He exclaimed, in soliloquy:

"That is it! Why did I not think of it before? The fiends—whoever they are—have brought me here, knowing I would sleep for a long time."

"They have gone on to Victoria, and to my home—the dastards! They have gone to take my slaves and cotton; but, by Heaven! if I can reach there before they have departed, I'll shoot them like dogs! I'll arouse the neighbors, and go on their trail, if they have escaped; and they shall hang—I swear it!"

"They have defrauded my child, and stolen her heritage. They plotted to ruin me and mine. I will find them out, if it takes me years."

"Oh, for strength to hasten home—to meet my daughter, my darling Marietta!"

Again he drank. Then staggering to his feet, he tottered to his horse, his muscles lax, and almost powerless, from the effects of the drug that had been administered him.

After almost superhuman efforts, the miserable man got balanced on the saddle; but lying flat, and striving in vain to gain a natural position. The horse bounded the length of its rope, the lariat straightened out, catching, at the same time, beneath the feet of the colonel, and he was hurled over the opposite side of the beast, striking heavily upon the ground.

After another drink, he discovered that he had neglected unloosing the lariat. He did not venture again to mount until confident of success, and also sure of himself. He placed the bottle in the saddle-bags, and securing the rope to the cantle of his saddle, and then loosely around his body, he succeeded in gaining his position.

Then, avoiding, through shame, the vicinity of the wagon-trail—fearing he would meet some of the wagon-masters, who knew him, and who might be inquisitive—he spurred toward Victoria; guiding his horse, so that he would leave the town to his left, and strike the Guadalupe between it and his home.

On he went, deciding to cross the river by the ford which Marietta used; the approaches to which, he had dug out for her express use, and to which reference has been made.

It was sunset, when the horse dashed into the timber of the Guadalupe, Colonel Montague being now more like a maniac than a sane man. Luckily he happened to strike a little "wash-out," the horse plunging into the water, and thrusting its muzzle, eyes deep, in the muddy waters; the colonel jumping from the saddle, and drinking—as he was obliged to do, for the want of a utensil—like a beast.

Not until he had slaked his burning thirst, did Colonel Montague, in his suffering, notice the roar and rush of waters, and realize that the "wash-out" was full of back-water. Then he knew that there was a freshet in the Guadalupe, although not a drop of rain had fallen; a not uncommon thing in Southern rivers, which become swollen down-country, where a drought prevails, by heavy storms higher up the stream.

Knowing that it would be impossible for him to cross at the ford near his home, the colonel slowly made his way down the river, amid the bottom-timber, thinking that he could pass through the town in the dusk of evening without being noticed, and thus reach his house.

Every mile he had ridden had increased his rage and thirst for revenge upon the men who had ruined him, and the liquor he had drunk had flamed him more and more, until he was in a most desperate and demoralized condition indeed.

Enough, certainly, of misery and wrong had been thrust upon him; but he was soon to learn that all this was as naught—soon to realize that there was far greater trouble, and more cause for agonizing grief than the mere loss of property, or temporarily of self respect.

Making his calculations, the colonel reached the bridge at twilight, when all were at supper, and he met no one—man, woman, or child.

He had passed over half the bridge—a rough affair of wood, at the time of our story—before he glanced into the raging waters.

No sooner did he do so, than he jerked his horse to a halt, his eyes fixed upon the river, and bulging in horror. It was only for a moment.

With a mad shriek of mortal anguish, he sprung from his horse toward the river, his head striking the plank guard. He fell in a heap, as one dead, while his horse, with a snort of fright, galloped off in frantic haste, over the bridge, and into the timber.

That glance into the roaring torrent had shown to Colonel Montague what was to him the most fearful sight conceivable.

Pinto, the pony of Marietta, fully equipped with her silver-mounted saddle and bridle, and her silver bugle hanging from the horn, was shooting down amid the boiling waters, tossed by the terrific torrent, yet limp and unstiffened, as the movements of the carcass showed—but lifeless, dead.

Where was Marietta?

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE FORD.

HAROLD HOLMES, when he said farewell to Marietta Montague, crossed the little ford, and responding with his flute to the bugle-notes, galloped down the Guadalupe to Victoria.

His state of mind was far from enviable.

Although he loved this fair girl, and was confident that she loved him most devotedly, yet, there were many difficulties to be swept away, before he could think of making her his own.

He felt that he had done wrong in making love to this maiden, unknown to her father, and he blamed himself, also, for repudiating, for a time, the one great object of his life and wanderings.

Under the influence of his new-born passion, he had nearly forgotten his sister's fearful wrongs.

It was true, he had no trail, no evidence, that he was within a thousand miles of the dastard whom he sought, but there were times when he felt that he was coming to the end of his search.

For his life, he could not explain the influences that prompted him, or account for them.

He was one who made a favorable impression wherever he went, and gained, without difficulty, any information that he sought; although his seemingly aimless wandering life was, in itself, suspicious, at that time and locality.

When he left the young girl, who had, in so short a time, taught him the secret of love, he was more eager than ever to discover the miscreant for whom he had so long searched, for he knew that, until he did so, there would be no opportunity for him to establish his worthiness for Marietta, or remove the objections of her father.

Since he had returned from Europe, and learned the terrible fate of his sister, he had been keeping his presence in the country a secret, as far as was possible. Few of his young friends knew that he still lived; and the lawyer, who had charge of his mother's estate, kept his secret, and aided him, in every way, in his search.

Harold knew that the false friend, who had so deceived his father, had long since emigrated to Texas, and he expected soon to come up with him; believing that he would locate as far as was possible from his old haunts, and still be in the United States.

However, he had not been able to learn anything in regard to him on the Rio Grande, and he reasoned that, as these two villains had been friends and partners, if he found one of them, he would probably find the other.

It was likely that both had changed their base of operations, through fear of his vengeance.

He had reason, however, to believe that the change of name, in one of them, had been recent, for he had learned of a certain James Wickford, who had settled on the Colorado, about the time of the disappearance of the faithless trustee from New Orleans.

But it was a large territory to explore, and, as he had come south, he could gain no intelligence of this Wickford, although he had met a man on the Rio Grande who had known him, and his description tallied exactly.

His informant believed that Wickford had left the Colorado two years back; but that was not certain.

Since gaining this information Harold had determined to again search up and down the Colorado; but he also resolved to search the country between that and the Rio Grande when on his way. It was in doing so that he met with his fate.

Had not the young man met Colonel Montague under such disadvantageous circumstances, when a captive to the rancheros, he would have inquired of him; and he determined that he would ask the colonel on the return of the latter from Indianola.

He had ascertained that Wickford had lost an arm, and that the villain, who had been known among the gamblers of the Crescent City as "Crooked Cramstock," and who had destroyed poor Hortense, had lost the little finger of his left hand, besides having an ace of each suit imprinted with India ink on the left wrist—small, but plainly to be seen by any one who took the trouble to watch him, as he strove frequently to hide it with his sleeve.

Two such men as these, so plainly marked, Harold felt sure of finding, sooner or later;

especially did they consort together, as of old.

He had traveled the Rio Grande from Fort Brown to Laredo, and thence north to San Antonio; and now, as he had not gained any information on the Guadalupe, he proposed to make inquiries south of Victoria, as much gambling was indulged in at the small towns on the Rio Nueces.

Upon lingering a portion of the day in Victoria, and learning nothing of interest connected with his search, our hero proceeded south some twenty miles to visit an old settler, whose cabin was a general rendezvous for all stock-hunters and travelers looking for information in regard to the country and settlers toward the Rio Grande.

Here Harold spent the night, and fortunately met with a man who gave him information in regard to James Wickford, which was conclusive that he was the faithless trustee, and that he still resided on the Colorado, on the same plantation which he had originally purchased when he arrived from New Orleans.

Nothing of Crooked Comstock, however, could he learn, but much in regard to Colonel Montague's duel; and which caused the young man to sympathize with the father of Marietta, and his detestation of Wickford to be doubled.

Harold had no doubt that Wickford had purchased the plantation with money belonging to himself and sister; and he resolved that he would wrest the same from the worse than thief if there was any law in the Lone Star State.

That Crooked Comstock, at times, visited at Wickford's, Harold had no doubt; and he now saw his way clear for his own, and for revenge.

Thanking his informant, he set out the next morning upon his return to Victoria, little dreaming that Colonel Montague lay, a most miserable and nearly ruined man, in the mesquites of Chocolate Creek, and made so by the very two miscreants upon whom he had sworn revenge.

Little thought he that the father of Marietta had good reason to be his rival in seeking vengeance upon the same men whom he sought.

Much less did he think that these self-same men were then galloping toward the Guadalupe, bent upon securing the slaves and cotton of Colonel Montague, gained by a fraud worse than mere theft—and that they had planned the same fate for the fair maiden whom he loved that had befallen his own innocent sister, Hortense!

Ignorant of all this, Harold Holmes rode at moderate pace beneath the blazing sun in the direction of Victoria, while, far away toward the Gulf, headed for the same point, galloped in mad haste the quartette of villains—the two Wickfords, Hank Hodge, and Antonio Garcia—and still further in the rear sped Colonel Montague toward his home, over the hot prairie, his face drawn with anguish, and ghastly as death, his bloodshot eyes fixed, his gray hair tangled, and his clothing stained and torn.

The sun was yet a half-hour above the horizon when Harold determined that he would see and speak with Marietta before departing for the Colorado on this new search. So he sped up the Guadalupe, between Victoria and the little ford at which he first saw his darling, passing through the town without halt, intending to camp at Montague Bend, or near the same.

And not more than half a mile ahead of our hero rode the miscreants, led by Antonio, through the timber directly to the ford, the Mexican seeming to know every foot of the ground, as he had said.

Although the villains had made an early start from Chocolate Creek, the heat had been more than they could bear; and they had made a long halt at noon, forming an awning of blankets, thus enabling the victim of their base plot to nearly overtake them. They also halted as soon as they reached the Guadalupe, just escaping being discovered by Harold Holmes.

Upon reaching the approach to the ford, the precious quartette made a halt for a moment and listened, inspecting the opposite bank. They then quickly urged their horses through the stream up the west approach and directly into the shades of the timber, there drawing rein at a gesture of warning from the Greaser.

Alighting and clutching their bridle-reins, all stood listening intently, the sound of hoofs on a traveled path being soon distinctly heard, as they approached the very spot where they were.

There was no time, however, for them to go deeper into the timber, as the sound of their horses, crashing through the undergrowth, would betray their presence to a certainty.

Only a moment or two elapsed, when a most lovely vision was presented to their view.

A beautiful maiden, mounted upon a gayly-equipped spotted pony—she herself attired in a most bewitching riding costume.

This they saw for a moment only. Then the fair equestrienne disappeared down the dug-out approach to the little ford.

Hank Hodge and the Wickfords stood, open-mouthed, astonished at the unexpected sight. Then, as the fair rider disappeared, the former exclaimed in a low tone:

"By all the gods, what a beauty! Antonio, do you know who that is?"

"Senorita Montague," was the laconic reply, with a significant laugh from the Mexican.

Whatever the remarks of his companions might have been, they were doomed not to express them; for Antonio turned pale, as he suddenly cried out:

"Spur—spur for your lives, senors!"

As he thus exclaimed, the Greaser sprung into his saddle, drove spurs home, and darted deeper into the timber, and away from the river.

"What, in the fiend's name, is up now?" called out Hank in unmixed surprise.

"Hark!" said Will Wickford, raising his hand.

The leaves were quivering, the long festoons of moss slowly swayed, and the air became filled with a strange and ominous roar, while the evening breeze, heretofore like the hot breath of a furnace, chilled their faces in consonance with the nameless cold and creeping dread occasioned by the mysterious roar.

"Spur for your lives!" rung from James Wickford.

It was like an echo of the exclamation of Antonio, so short was the interval after the departure of the Mexican.

"Spur, I say! There's a water-spout upstream."

"Great Heavens!" exclaimed Will Wickford, as he urged his snorting horse through the undergrowth. "That beautiful girl is doomed. She is in the ford!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE SECOND TIME.

HAROLD HOLMES proceeded up the Guadalupe, feeling relieved in mind more than he could express, from the welcome information he had received.

He was well satisfied that he would not be recognized by Wickford, as he had changed greatly since his last meeting with the unprincipled defrauder; but he knew that he would be obliged to assume another name while on the search.

The young man now began indulging in pleasant thoughts of Marietta Montague, although still mingled with grave doubts of the course of their love running smooth.

The baughty colonel would doubtless consider him an adventurer; and until he had accomplished his duty to his sister's memory, he would not be at liberty to reveal in detail his past life and his true and rightful position.

This more than aught else determined him to see his darling once more during the absence of her father, although he was averse to acting thus dishonorably, and leading her perhaps to deceive her parent more than she had already done, to the cost of her peace of mind.

As he neared the place where he had been so near meeting an ignominious death by the rope, he recalled the act of the daring girl, who had not only proved her love but had, without a thought of self, betrayed her strong interest in him to the maddened mob of rancheros. Although Harold realized that the men who had captured him and decided to hang him held Marietta Montague in the highest respect, bordering on adoration, yet such a thing as admitting an interest in him before them was, of course, not to be thought of for a moment.

These meditations caused our hero to neglect urging his steed, and the animal being tired

lagged on the trail. Harold, however, soon spurred onward, filled with eager and most pleasurable anticipation.

Turning a sweeping bend in the river, where a view northwestward was open, the young man suddenly halted in the greatest amazement, mingled with alarm, and with good cause. Straight before him, seemingly but a couple of miles up the Guadalupe from the little ford, which was close at hand, he discovered a black funnel-shaped cloud rushing toward the stream from the north, its point waving and whirling, and almost touching the earth.

Harold knew in a moment that this was a large water-spout, and that it would without doubt break upon reaching the towering timber of the bottom, bursting upon the earth, and turning the Guadalupe—now a shallow and placid stream—into a swollen and raging torrent.

He perceived that, if he did not gallop quickly, it would be impossible for him to ford the river and gain an interview with Marietta. So he drove spurs deep, his horse plunging forward over the intervening space between the ford and his position with frantic snorts; the eyes of the animal blazing with mingled fear and pain, proving that the horse knew well that danger threatened.

The poor beast was somewhat jaded, traveling through that extremely hot day, even at a slow pace; and our hero was now very anxious to cross at the ford, before the expected rush of mad waters should make it impossible for him to do so.

He therefore galloped at headlong speed to the point where the first break in the bank marked the approach to the ford. He then jerked his horse to a halt, in order to ascertain, by listening, if the danger of the freshet that he had no doubt was coming was near at hand, and if it would be possible for him to reach the opposite side of the river in safety.

Had the approach to the waters been directly in front of that on the opposite side of the river, the young man would have made a very startling discovery, which might have changed the course of coming events, but this was not so, and Marietta, who urged Pinto into the river, after having been seen by the four ruffians, was hidden from the view of her lover. This was on account of the approach on the south bank being further from the stream than where our hero had halted.

The trees and undergrowth shut out all view, but Harold trusted to his sense of hearing to judge of the danger that he felt was fast coming.

At the very instant that he brought his horse to a halt his features were filled with concern and apprehension, for a dull, ominous roar, that now sounded from up the stream, told him plainly that it would be madness for him to attempt to cross.

Being confident, however, that the coming waters would not reach the upper bank of the stream, Harold at once urged his horse from the dug-out approach to the ford up on the main bank amid the trees and directly toward the river. Here he could then observe the torrent as it sped past, for he knew it would be a grand and magnificent sight.

As the river now was, he was reminded of the time when he gazed out over the rippling waters at Marietta Montague upon her pony, and no sooner did this beautiful scene occur to him than his horse sprang free from the undergrowth, and there, just in front of him, was the very scene that he had just recalled reproduced in fact.

There she sat, in the same attitude and attired in the same manner, her pony wading listlessly through the waters. Harold was thunderstruck, and for the moment incapable of speech or motion.

Marietta was doomed to die in that raging torrent before his eyes!

And at the very instant that Harold caught sight of this, Pinto, as well as his young mistress, seemed suddenly to become aware that some dread danger threatened, Marietta's attention being attracted up the stream, although she could not hear distinctly the roar that filled the air, on account of the splashing caused by the pony, and the ripple and rush of the shallow waters around her.

At the same moment Pinto halted, tossing his head around and pointing his muzzle up the stream, snuffing the air and then snorting with fright.

Just then the wall of dark waters came into

view, rising three feet or more above the surface of the stream, roaring ominously and stretching from bank to bank.

High above it all, rung the voice of Harold Holmes:

"Whip up, Marie! Whip up, or you are lost!"

Then, finding that she could not distinguish his words, he gave a piercing yell, throwing his arms out wildly, as he cried, from his inmost soul:

"Oh, my God! Save her, save her!"

Whirling his horse, the young man dashed headlong through the undergrowth to the approach to the ford.

The fair girl now perceived her danger, and the presence of her lover. The cry that he gave, brought her to herself, and made death seem ten times more terrible and black, in contrast with a possible life.

The pony, however, was on the move, and plunged madly toward the exit from the river in front—the only hope for safety and existence!

Marietta kept her seat, her face pale as death, her hair flying wild; and she, the center of clouds of spray, which glittered in the sun's rays, like ten thousand jewels. Thus was the picture of his darling presented to Harold, as he turned to force his horse, at terrific speed, down the decline to the ford; and thus was it also, to the four conspirators on the opposite side of the river, who, attracted by the yell of the young horseman, had stolen back, to peer through the branches at the pony struggling in the torrent.

Bravely did the little beast strain every muscle to escape, with his mistress, from the mad waters, but its frenzied exertions were useless, as were the far-reaching bounds of the steed of Harold Holmes. The latter was now dashing, at full speed, to the rescue; but the foaming wall of waters, with a roar that was deafening and terrible, inclosed the maiden and her pretty pony in its merciless embrace.

A shriek of terrible dread, and mortal anguish shot from the lips of poor Marietta as, with her horrified gaze fixed upon her lover, she was swallowed up by the advancing tide!

The eyes of Harold were fixed, in a stony stare, upon his darling, as she disappeared; his teeth were set, his features deathlike, and contorted with an anguish and horror that were unspeakable.

Instantly he sprang from his seat in the saddle, afar over the head of his terrified horse, into the mad waters, darting down the stream with great velocity; and, in a moment more, clasped the senseless form of Marietta, while he battled for life and love, with the most herculean efforts.

Pinto's head broke the surface but once; then a shriek, that was almost human in intonation, came from the doomed pony, as he struggled with the roaring torrent, and was hurled beneath the seething, surging foam.

Never did human battle more frantically for life, than did Harold Holmes. In his active brain, he at once recalled a fact, which was of slight use unless taken advantage of immediately; and which, even then, offered but little hope of success in escaping.

He recalled the fact, that a huge tree had been undermined, and had fallen into the river, but a short distance from the ford. He could not hope to battle with the mad waters, and gain the bank; but he might, possibly, gain a grip upon this tree, and reach a point of safety in its branches with his senseless burden.

His whole strength and skill were now brought into play. It was impossible for him to keep the head of Marietta clear of the raging waters, and he well knew that a very brief exposure in the mad torrent would seal her doom.

With set teeth and glaring eyes, he fought the foaming, whirling waters with desperation and skill; the roar and rush of the tumultuous mass deafening him. But, not for a moment did he lose his presence of mind. He still kept his glance upon the south bank, watching for their only hope—the fallen giant of the forest.

If he passed this, he knew well that death would claim him and the fair maiden whom he clasped with an iron grip; the mad stream at times nearly tearing her from him.

On they went, playthings for the resistless flood—these two, who seemed to have been doomed to be brought together in times of most deadly danger, when the life of one depended upon the other.

Were they thus to die, they would be hurried on by the triumphant current to the Mexican Gulf!

A thought that this was to be their fate came into Harold's mind; but still undaunted, he fought for the mastery, and soon caught sight of the tree to which he had looked so hopefully.

It was with renewed hope that he now made the discovery that he was in the direct line for the tree; also, that the huge branches had resisted the shock—rushing around, as he had hoped, in a whirling semicircle, before meeting with and joining that portion of the torrent between the tree and the bank.

Harold gathered his strength for the grand effort upon which more than his own life depended; and as he shot around the outer side of the huge limbs, he clutched at one of them. This merely served to draw him around in the less rapid current; but to his horror, his hold gave way.

With the cry from his inmost soul—

"Oh, my God! Give me strength to save her!" he madly caught at another of the limbs—the only one that could possibly be reached.

If his hold should give way this time, Marietta and himself were indeed doomed!

His muscles gathered in knots, as he lunged toward it, and happily seized it. Then he breathed freer.

But as he clung thus, panting with exertion, he perceived that it would be impossible for him to climb up, and out from the waters, with but one arm at liberty. Holding Marietta clear of the stream, Harold groaned aloud, as this fact flashed upon him, knowing that his strength could not hold out long.

There was little hope of the girl's recovering for some time, and for a moment the young man was almost overcome with despair; but not for long, as his mind recovered almost immediately—a thought occurring to him, which promised a successful issue from his terrible position.

He noticed a long silken scarf about the waist of the maiden, and he knew that it was strong. He held to the limb, quickly secured this scarf under the arms of Marietta, and fastened the slack ends together, in a firm knot, thus forming a loop, through which he succeeded in thrusting his head. He now found himself able to use both arms and hands.

Luckily there were projecting ends of broken limbs, upon which he could step, or their weight would have rendered it impossible for him to have climbed upward.

It was a slow and laborious taxing of every muscle, and that to the utmost. In a short time—although it seemed anything but short to him, as he feared that he might lose his grip at any moment—Harold reached the main trunk of the tree, that extended to the bank.

There he seated himself, with Marietta in his arms, his strength exhausted, and he trembling like a leaf.

"My God, I thank Thee!"

Thus he exclaimed, in heartfelt tones. Then he pressed his lips upon the ghastly white brow of his darling, who appeared more dead than alive, her wealth of hair hanging over his arm, from which dripped a shower of water into the raging torrent below—that mad whirl of waters, from which the two had so strangely and so miraculously escaped.

CHAPTER XXI.

A NEW TERROR.

WHEN the villainous plotters heard the yell of Harold, they all paused, and gazed at each other in wonder. Although the Mexican had rightly interpreted the roar that sounded from up the Guadalupe, and all had felt sure that the beautiful girl was going straight to her doom; yet not one of them thought of giving her warning, or endeavoring to rescue her. They thought only of their own cowardly selves.

The Greaser had known from the first that it was absurd to think that the freshet, however fierce and high, would overflow the banks of the Guadalupe at that point; but, as he judged that his employers were not confident of this, he desired to frighten them, in order to hasten the business in hand. For he well knew that the sooner it was over with, and the party away from the vicinity, the better it would be for them all.

Antonio was well aware of the popularity of the colonel, and that he would, upon his recovery, proceed, without doubt, to hunt the

men down who had so wronged him; and he knew, as well, that not a few of the cattlemen on the river would recognize him, and that he would receive short shrift, should they detect him in any crookedness.

So it was that the Mexican wished to get away from the Guadalupe as soon as possible.

The Wickfords and Hank had not thought to find any one at the plantation except the daughter, the overseer, and the slaves, and they felt certain that the yell which they had heard did not proceed from the overseer, who must be on the same side of the river as the plantation and themselves.

As they now halted, realizing that they were in no danger, their minds, bereft of concern for personal safety, reverted naturally to the daughter of Colonel Montague, whom they had seen, and whose presence they connected with the yell.

"We're a set of blasted fools!" burst out Hank, in self-condemnation and disgust.

"Why do you say that?" asked James Wickford.

"Because it's a fact," was the reply. "You said that beauty was the colonel's daughter, Antonio?"

"Si, senor!" said the Mexican, decidedly.

"Then, we've lost a good opportunity—that's all! We were foolish, not to have gained her good will, by warning her against going into the ford. But it is too late now. Some one else has done it."

"I declare," said Jim, regretfully, "you are right, Hank! Will could have made things a good deal easier for us, had he broken cover, and saved the girl from the flood. And, come to think of it, this flood may be damaging to our proposed plans. Will, you had better at once strike south, toward the up-country road, find the camp of Ted Taylor, and have him run his wagons in near the gin-house, very early to-morrow morning."

"If we don't do this, we may lose the cotton. Strange and unexpected events may occur, that will force us to levant from here, at speed."

"That's the programme, exactly!" agreed Hank.

"But what's the difficulty with you, Will? You appear to be somewhat absent minded. It isn't the beauty of old Montague's daughter, is it?"

This was said with some sarcasm.

Will Wickford did not reply, but set out at once on his mission in regard to the wagon-train.

"Don't mind him," said his father, impatiently. "He's peculiar at times. Come on, Hank! We'd better leave our horses here, if we would escape observation."

"I'm agreeable," said the other, dismounting at once. "But, I tell you what I think, Jim—Will is dead sure to be anxious, now that he has seen that gal, to take that part of the contract himself, regardless of his intense hatred for all belonging to the colonel."

"You don't know him, Hank," was the rather fretful reply. "All the pretty girls in the State could not affect Will in the least. The girl is a beauty, I admit; but, we needn't waste time talking, for all that. She is probably drowned, anyway."

The three—Will having left—now proceeded toward the river-bank. They soon reached a point from which they could overlook the ford.

At this moment, they saw the daring bound of Harold into the river, watched him battling with the flood, clutch the maiden, and both shoot rapidly along with the mad current.

James Wickford clutched the arm of Hank, almost shrieking in the ear of the latter:

"Great Heavens! That man is Harold Holmes! May the flood swallow him up forever!"

Hank looked at Jim, in astonishment. Never had he seen his old pard in such an agitated state. Fear had taken complete possession of him.

Then his own face paled, and his eyes became filled with horror. James felt that, though Hank was looking directly at him, he saw him not, but some terrible imaginary picture, that curdled his blood, and turned him into a seeming statue.

Antonio looked upon the pair in the most utter bewilderment, thinking both were going mad.

"I thought—I thought I saw something in those eyes that resembled—"

Thus gasped Hank, addressing himself more than his companion. He then stopped, casting

a furtive look at James, while a shudder convulsed him.

"It seems you were sensible of a resemblance to Harold Holmes; you, who have not seen him since he was a lad! Is that so, Hank?"

"Ye-es!" stammered the latter, evidently relieved. "I did notice it, but I would not have recalled the name, had you not spoken it."

Hank had recovered himself, but was yet pale as death.

"But why should it affect you?" inquired Jim.

"Don't you see, it might balk our plans," was the reply.

Just then, the two men saw the Greaser behind them.

"Run, Antonio!" shouted Wickford, pointing down the river. "Run, and ascertain if those two have been drowned. I'd give five hundred dollars to know that the fellow was dead!"

"He must be dead," said the Mexican. "He could not reach the bank. But, if he has, Antonio's knife will split his heart for five hundred pesos!"

Both men now seated themselves, to await the return of the Mexican; each, for a time, busy with his own disagreeable thoughts.

"I told you," said Jim, suddenly. "I told you, Hank, that the boy lived, although I did not half believe it myself. I have felt that some calamity was hovering over me, ever since I started to carry out my revenge upon Montague."

"I totally lost sight, at times, of the fact, that others had ample cause to seek revenge upon myself. By Heavens! This fellow seems to be a giant in strength. If he escapes, he'll be on our trail."

"What, indeed, could have brought him here, unless he has gotten trace of us? If he should find out that I sent Hortense by one of my hired tools to New York, and that she had never since been heard of, he'd torture me to death!"

Had not James Wickford been looking in another direction, toward the point Antonio was expected, he would have seen that his companion was most singularly affected. The face of Hank was again of that deathly hue, that it had worn, when the terrible vision had been presented to his mind's eye, a few evenings before, in the Casimir House, at Indianola.

The beautiful eyes, from the rare pale face of Hortense Holmes, as she knelt before him, pleading for mercy, were before him now. His grasp was upon her slender form, and he was hurling her, through the night, into the surging waters of the Mississippi. Her cry of horror, struggling with the roaring night-winds, shot again through his brain, congealing the very marrow in his bones!

Verily, the way of the transgressor is hard!

Neither of the men had the slightest doubt in regard to the identity of Harold.

Since the perfecting of their plot of revenge, and departure from the Colorado, the elder Wickford and Hank had been drinking heavily—the former, however, more than the latter. The success of their scheme at Indianola, and the long ride, during which they were tortured by anxiety—fearing that the friends of the colonel would find him, and arrive on the Guadalupe in time to prevent their getting away with the cotton and negroes—all this had taxed their minds greatly.

When, therefore, they saw Harold Holmes, the allusions of James Wickford to the past, worked upon the mind of Hank, conjuring up the most fearful visions; and James was in a terrible state of apprehension—in fact, both men were, for a time, in a most demoralized condition, each more bent upon his own unenviable thoughts, and both anxious for the future.

Although neither of them could explain why it was, both were confident that the success of their present plans—indeed their very lives—depended upon the news that Antonio would bring.

This news was simply, whether Harold Holmes was dead or alive; for neither of them believed that the Mexican would come off victor, should he attack Harold. Their one hope was, that the latter would lose his life in the mad waters.

CHAPTER XXII.

STRIPPING THE WRECK.

"Jim, this won't do!" said Hank, at length. "We've lingered here long enough. Antonio will know where we have gone, and he can fol-

low us. It is evident that young Holmes is on your track, and it won't do to risk chances. Every minute is precious, and may mean life or death for us. If the colonel should turn up, the very devil will be to pay!"

"You are right, Hank," replied Wickford; "right, in every word you have spoken. We must start at once. The Greaser will know about where to meet us, as we are following directions to reach the plantation."

"It must be as you say, that Harold Holmes has got trace of me. He may have been on the Colorado, and while there, learned all about my duel with Montague, and also where the colonel lived. Then, finding that I had left home, he surmised that I had come here to avenge myself. But, no! This doesn't seem reasonable either. It must be accidental."

"One strange thing is, that Montague's daughter seemed to know him. I'm all mixed up, Hank. Pass the brandy flask. If he escapes the flood, and rescues the girl, he'll be at the plantation right off."

"Then, if the old man turns up, we'll be in a tight fix, if we don't levant from here quickly. Everything looks dubious. I'll take a drink, and we'll get from here instanter."

"Drink lively, then, and jump your horse!" was the reply of Hank. "This doesn't suit me. I'm getting infernally nervous. The surroundings here are not calculated to cause a man to indulge in rose-tinted thoughts. Just the opposite. The scene seems ominous of a run of bad luck."

"You are superstitious, Hank," said the other, with affected unconcern. "Take a drink, and we'll soon have clear sky overhead."

Scarcely had the two men driven spurs, when a yell that expressed the extreme of terror rung through the arches of the bottom-timber.

Both Hank and Jim halted before the animals had gone but a few yards, and sat gazing into each other's faces, each seeing that the other was pale as death and greatly alarmed.

"Jim Wickford," said Hank impressively, "I knew the luck had turned. That yell came from Antonio. Holmes has escaped the flood, and has got the best of the Greaser. The worst of our luck is to come!"

For a moment James was unable to speak, from excitement and apprehension. When at length he did reply, no acquaintance would have recognized his voice, so hoarse and unnatural was it.

"Hank, you're a croaker!" he said suddenly. "I don't know how to account for the change in you. How do you know that was Antonio yelling? It must have been the last yell of the very man whom we wish dead. He and the girl have gone down with the flood. I feel it!"

The tone of Wickford's voice belied the purport of his words. He was trembling, too, in every limb.

"Come on!" ordered Hank. "Talk is useless. I'll gamble heavy on the truth of my assertion though. We're in for it now. If we don't get the cotton and niggers to-night, we never will. It is a desperate venture, but I don't back out."

"When we meet the overseer, don't mince matters. I'm the worst man in the world when I get right mad, and I'm getting red-hot now. Come on!"

Both now dashed through the undergrowth, and soon had passed beyond the gardens and the row of negro cabins; and when out of view from the latter struck out from the timber and along one of the plantation wagon-roads.

To the west they discovered the gin-house, and galloped toward it at once, just as the sun was setting.

"We're in luck this streak, if it will only last awhile," said Hank. "There's the overseer on a mule, and the field-hands following him to the gin-house. The cotton's baled, too, all right."

"No fooling now, Jim, for there is no time. Show papers, and demand the niggers. I've got handcuffs along, enough for all; and we'll rope them in a line and make a break for timber."

"I'll work the business, never fear," was the answer. "Take your cues from me, and listen to every word I say. You may chip in when there is a favorable opening. Here, we are near to them!"

Upon reaching the vicinity of the overseer,

the two villains drew rein, James Wickford striving to hide the fact that he had but one arm by the extravagant use that he made of the remaining one in managing his horse.

The overseer gazed at the two strangers with something of surprise at their not going directly to the house.

"You are the overseer for my friend Colonel Montague, I think?" remarked Wickford, questioningly.

The man seemed surprised at being addressed in this way, and was for a moment unable to answer.

Then he reflected that possibly these gentlemen had called at the mansion, and finding the colonel from home, had come to him with their business, whatever it was.

"My name is Meadows," he replied, "and I am overseer for the colonel. What can I do for you?"

"You know that Colonel Montague went to Indianola yesterday morning, I suppose, Mr. Meadows? But, excuse me, my name is Wales—Wyman Wales—and my friend here is Mr. Hodge."

The overseer touched his hat, as he replied:

"Yes; I know that my employer started for Indianola. Have you gentsseen him? I rather expected him to return to-night."

The villains perceived that the overseer was a much more intelligent man than they had expected to meet. They changed their tactics slightly.

"Yes," said Wickford, "we have seen your employer. Perhaps he may have mentioned to you that he intended to enter into some cotton speculation?"

"He did intimate such an intention," was the reply.

"Well, Mr. Meadows, here is a letter to me from the colonel, which will, I think, explain our business. It is yet light enough for you to read it."

As he spoke the overseer took the epistle from his hand, and perused it. It ran as follows, and was an exact imitation of the colonel's writing:

"CASIMIR HOUSE,
INDIANOLA, JULY —, 18—.

"TO MART MEADOWS, at Montague Plantation:—
"SIR:—Deliver to the bearer, Mr. Wyman Wales, the fifteen field hands, designated by name on enclosed slip. Mr. Wales will produce bills of sale for the slaves. Given and signed by yours, etc.,
"MAURICE MONTAGUE."

"The colonel was in somewhat of a hurry when he wrote," remarked James, "and although there is perhaps no necessity for any explanation, I will say that your employer has invested largely in cotton, and is forced to part with his negroes to furnish the money required for the investment."

"Here are the bills of sale for each of the fifteen field hands, as well as an order to deliver all the baled cotton on the plantation for immediate transportation. I believe the papers are as asserted."

This last was in a questioning manner, as the overseer stared in blank, undisguised amazement.

"Why, yes, Mr. Wales," he said, recovering himself; "the papers are all right. Excuse me; but I am very much surprised. However, I am not sorry, as I wished to leave the business, and go to San Antonio."

"He has no need for an overseer now, so I can strike out at once. I wanted to take the trip before the crop was in, but the colonel would not let me off. There's a woman in the business, as you may have supposed, gentlemen, by my being so eager to start out for San Antonio to-night."

This the man said with a laugh.

Hank and Jim joined in this, for they were delighted to see that he put no difficulty in their way.

"Trot up here, boys!" called out Meadows to the hands, and the negroes soon grouped around with a puzzled expression upon their dark faces.

"Boys," said the overseer, "Colonel Montague has sold you all to this gentleman, Mr. Wales, who is now your master. Your old master will probably buy you back however. He had need of money for the present. That is all."

Meadows then read off the names and added:

"These are your slaves, as the bills of sale call for, Mr. Wales. Give me a receipt and I'm off."

"Here it is," was the reply. "Prepared

and signed in anticipation of its being required."

Then with a "Good-by, boys," to the slaves, and a wave of his hand, with "Good-by, gentlemen," to Hank and Jim, the overseer sprang on his mule and was soon galloping toward the Alamo City.

To describe the consternation of the poor negroes as the words of Meadows were fully understood by them would be impossible.

They were filled with as much astonishment as if they had received an order to prepare for immediate execution. Heavy groans broke out on all sides, but gradually the assertion of the overseer to the effect that their old master would purchase them back pretty soon began to break upon their minds, and they grasped at the promise as a drowning person will at any floating object that promises relief.

The words of their new master at first gave the poor negroes cause for less concern and grief than had oppressed them since they had been informed of the change in their lives—a change that might part them forever from all that they loved. A little kindness goes far with such.

"Take a rest there by the cotton-gin, boys," ordered Jim, with a lordly gesture of his hand, "you will be obliged to wait until the bales are loaded upon the wagons before getting your suppers."

The slaves walked silently and with bowed heads to the place designated, seating themselves upon a log, where they were at too great a distance from the pair of villains to overhear their conversation.

No sooner were they thus seated than James Wickford broke out, in a voice of the most intense exultation, relief and joy.

"Now, Hank, what do you say about luck changing? This is the kind of change that pays."

"By Heavens! Did you ever know a man to play right into your hand and beat himself more easily than that Meadows? He's a cute chap, too—a Yankee, dead sure—but his mind is on that San Antonio woman, and that's why we got the best of him."

"I'll be tee-totally cussed if I ever knew any game to run more smooth, Jim!" agreed his pard, much elated. "Look over to the southwest. Dog-goned if Will hain't made the rifle!"

"There's the wagon-train coming! They're taking down the fences to avoid going around by the road. That wagon-master is a brick, Jim, and knows his biz to the letter."

"You bet!" returned Wickford. "I don't mix with men in such games without knowing just what they are. If Antonio was here now we'd be all right. We need him bad."

"You'll never see him again, Jim! Set that down in your memorandum-book. He'd been here before this time, if he was able to crawl."

"Well, perhaps so! I hope they're both dead; for, if Antonio has been captured, he'll give us away. I'm certain of that. You can't trust a Greaser."

"You're right there, Jim; but it's time to take another drink. Here comes Will at a dead gallop, just in time to join us."

In fifteen minutes more the negroes were loading the wagons that Will had secured with the cotton of Colonel Montague, and half an hour later the slaves were handcuffed, and crowded into a wagon—their moans and lamentations kept in check by the revolvers of Will, Hank, and Jim; they riding behind the wagon, the same being the last in the train.

Soon all disappeared in the scattering timber beyond the cultivated fields, leaving the cotton-gin and surroundings on Montague Plantation silent, empty, and deserted by all of the human and brute species.

James Wickford's luck had not yet turned.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE.

PANTING with the exertion of his terrible battle with the torrent, Harold Holmes sat for some time on the trunk of the gigantic fallen tree, holding the form of Marietta in his arms. He felt sure that if he strove to gain the bank with his precious burden over the quivering trunk both would be precipitated again into the mad river. Should this occur, it would prove certain death, for well he knew that he could not again contend even for a brief time against the torrent, much less gain a place of security on either bank.

Not another moment could he have exerted

his muscles to struggle with the furious element. His strength had been for the time entirely exhausted.

Soon he relinquished his hold upon the limb, and smoothed the hair of the fair girl caressingly, pressing out the water and uttering soft words of endearment as he did so. He had been permitted thus, a second time, to save her life, and he was filled with a strange bewilderment at having, through a combination of peculiar circumstances, been attracted to the ford upon these two occasions. Seemingly thus guided to save one who was apparently destined to be the one of all others on earth to him!

Had he known that the two men who had so terribly wronged him, and whom he had so long sought, were within a quarter of a mile of him—that they had witnessed his desperate plunge into the river to the rescue of his darling Marietta—that they had recognized him—had Harold known this, he would have been more astonished still, in fact completely overpowered.

He would have believed, and with good reason, that what had happened had been through a mysterious fate—a fate that was leading him, not only toward revenge, but that had led him, at the same time, toward a love that was to be his recompense for all the heartaches and sufferings he had undergone on account of the terrible ending of his sister's life.

However that might be, the belief, to this effect, that had for some time been his, was destined soon to become a firmly-rooted conviction.

Under the solicitous attentions of her preserver, seconded by the cool breeze that swept down over the raging waters, Marietta Montague soon opened her eyes, in the utmost bewilderment; but the next moment her pale face became suffused with blushes, and her eyes gazed into those of Harold with an expression of undying love and thankfulness—the roar of the torrent, and the condition in which she found herself, bringing back, almost instantly, to her mind, the dread near past.

"Marie!"

The young man spoke the name in a soft whisper, expressing much in the intonation and in the look that accompanied it.

"Oh, Harold! Again I owe my life to you!"

"Thank Heaven it is over and you are safe, my darling!" said Harold earnestly. "But we are yet in danger. This tree upon which we are seated may be washed down-stream. I have been, since we gained its friendly shelter, too weak to venture to the bank, but now I will make the attempt."

"See! You are bound to me now"—pointing to the sash—"by silken ties. If one falls, the other follows. We live or die together, Marie!"

"None shall part us," said the young girl; "not even death. I could not live without you, Harold. You have twice saved me. Our lives are linked together."

"So it seems indeed, my darling," he answered. "Now keep your position by clinging to that limb"—placing her upon her feet as he spoke—"I'll soon have you in security on the bank. I feel that my strength is coming back to me."

As Harold arose to his feet there came the sound of cracking wood from the bank, and the huge tree seemed to be moving down the stream.

Quickly he clutched the maiden in his arms and turned toward the bank, steadying himself for a run.

At this moment Marietta gave a scream, exclaiming:

"Oh, Harold, we are lost! A fiend in human shape is severing the roots of the tree with his knife!"

Harold heard her, but ran steadily on, and sprang between two huge roots that had been torn from the earth at the fall of the tree; and the next moment had placed her upon the bank.

With one sweeping glance he then discovered the crouching form of a Mexican, who, knife in hand, was about to bound away into the undergrowth.

Instantly Harold drew his knife and darted upon the Greaser, who was so startled by the unexpected appearance of those whom, it was plain, he was striving to launch into eternity, that he had dashed off at first view of them.

As the dastard was about to plunge into the undergrowth, Harold clutched his long black hair and jerked him violently backward, hurling him some six feet from the bushes and into the shallow excavation formed by the up torn roots of the fallen tree—a space semicircular in form.

The appalled Mexican whirled about, staggering this way and that, and nearly falling to the earth by the extraordinary momentum caused by the force with which the infuriated Harold had thrown him.

The latter was maddened almost beyond control at the discovery of such a dastardly deed as the Greaser had intended to commit. His anger was increased by the fact that the cowardly cur had intended to send the just rescued Marietta to the death she had so miraculously escaped.

So intense was his fury that he could not utter a word. His eyes blazed, his teeth were set, and every muscle was drawn for instant action.

Antonio looked on, with a terrified stare.

The great strength of Harold had been made manifest to him, even after that strength had been taxed to the utmost; and as he viewed his powerfully-built foe, the Greaser saw that he had little hope of coming out of a contest alive.

He was supple as a snake, wiry, and of great strength, besides being quick of movement. His only hope was from the fact that he could use his knife with dexterity and a most electric-like movement.

Poor Marietta sat on the mossy bank, not ten feet from them, trembling for her rescuer.

Thus they were positioned for a moment. Then like a panther springing upon its prey, Harold bounded with flashing bowie upon the Mexican.

The latter recalled the fact that a thousand dollars, as well as life, were his could he kill his foe, besides the possession of the maiden. He therefore braced himself for his antagonist.

Foot to foot, face to face, and steel to steel—a glittering and clashing of blades, that was terrific, followed; while around and around in the little excavation they whirled.

Marietta held her breath. Her attempted cries were but spasmodic, gasping sounds; her fair, jeweled fingers clutched into the sward, and about the bushes, in her nervous, terrible, and most dread and torturing apprehension.

At length the agonized maiden, by a superhuman effort, threw off the oppressive, death-like weight that seemed crushing her to despair, and cried out, in anguish and entreaty:

"Oh, Harold! Let the wretch escape! You are torturing me! I shall go mad! I shall die!"

So intense had been the fury of the young man, and so difficult did he find it to parry the shower of lightning-like knife-thrusts of the Mexican, that he had undoubtedly lost everything like consideration for Marietta.

This must even have been the case before he darted into the fight, or he would have requested her to move on in the direction of her home during the fearful knife-duel.

As it was, he was recalled, by her voice, to the thought of the torture he was inflicting upon the unfortunate girl, by thus compelling her to witness the savage fight, and his apparent peril; and this nerved him to an instant effort to bring the conflict to an end, for he could not now cease defending himself, and withdraw, thus giving the Mexican the advantage, and postponing indefinitely his revenge.

By this time, Harold had learned the manner of the Greaser in using the knife, and as Marietta cried out to him, he feigned to be so overwhelmed by her voice, as to leave open his guard. This was immediately taken advantage of by Antonio, who thrust his knife, with great force, directly at the heart of his antagonist; but the blade of Harold shot upward, and then downward, with the velocity of lightning, and was driven to the hilt through the muscular portion of the villain's arm—the point, and half the steel protruding from the under portion of it.

Instantly the *cuchillo* dropped from the nerveless grasp of the Greaser, a cry of agony shot from his trembling lips; and the next moment, he lay upon the earth, apparently lifeless, felled by a terrible blow from the fist.

of Harold, who then sprung to the side of Marietta, saying, in a pleading and regretful tone:

"Forgive me, Marie! I was so furious at the dastard, who sought to send us back into the foaming flood, that I lost all thought of you for the moment. I would have thrust my knife through his heart, instead of his arm, and you not cried out, as you did."

"It must have been a terrible sight to you, but I considered nothing but the attempted crime, and I avenged it. I wonder what is the next thing down on the bills. Do you remember ever having seen this Mexican before?"

"Thank Heaven! You are unharmed," cried the maiden. "Oh, Harold! It was awful. No; I never saw that horrible man in my life!"

"That is strange; for I never did—of that, I am positive. Revenge must have been his only motive, and as we do not know him, he must be in the service of others. However, he'll harm us no more. I'll secure him; and, for the present, leave him here. He shall be delivered up to your father, and forced to reveal his object, or betray his villainous employers, for he must have such."

Harold then secured the Greaser, hand and foot; using the silk sash of Marietta for that purpose. After this, he again turned to the poor girl, whom he found sobbing convulsively:

"Do not weep, my darling," he said, much pained at the sight of her emotion; "I sincerely trust that all dangers are now past, and I shall take you to your home, regardless of any."

"If your father has returned, I shall explain everything, and you shall not be visited with his anger. My horse is beyond reach, over the river. The noble animal will miss me, but I cannot reach him to-night."

"Come, Marie! I'll carry you in my arms through the wood. What! Weeping yet?"

"I am crying for my poor little pony. I fear I have lost him. He has been drowned."

"Better him than you, my darling! Come, dry your tears, and thank God that you are safe."

Harold then lifted her from the bank, and carried her, as a mother would a child, in his strong arms; her own being around his neck, and her cheek close to his—on through the dark timber, and thence through the gardens, and up on the veranda, where Aunt Huldry, and the other house servants, with extravagant lamentations, received their young mistress from the arms of the young man.

But Marietta waved them off, begging her rescuer to be seated, until she could change her apparel; and ordering the wondering servants to prepare tea, after Aunt Huldry had made the statement, that:

"Ole mars' curnil not done come till yit!"

All the slaves knew that something dreadful had happened to their young mistress; and, not only this, but the wives and children of the field hands were in a greatly excited and anxious state, at the unusual delay of their husbands and fathers in returning from their labor. No announcement of the transaction with the overseer had been made at the house.

No one knowing, then, the why and wherefore, the women and children flitted from cabin to cabin, conferring with each other, in doleful and hushed tones.

The black, funeral-shaped cloud, which many had observed rushing through the sky, and bursting to the west, followed by the roar and rush of the avalanche of waters in the Guadalupe, had awakened the superstitious terrors of the negroes; and even the strong-minded Aunt Huldry prophesied:

"Dar am gwine ter be a heap o' strouble come ter sum folkses from dat or'nary cloud; now you jes' watch!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

RETURNING HOME.

THERE were trees and undergrowth on each side of the road at either end of the Victoria bridge, and it was some little distance to any dwelling; the hotel, general store, and blacksmith's shop standing on the south side of the street, and too far away for the wild cry of Colonel Montague to be heard—especially as the denizens of the town were occupied in partaking of the evening meal.

The roar of the torrent had attracted some little notice previous to the advent of the colonel on the bridge; but such a rush of waters

was not uncommon from heavy rains up-country, when not a drop of water fell in the vicinity of Victoria. Therefore it did not cause any great excitement or particular notice—the stream quite frequently rising eighteen, and even more feet above the common water mark in a few hours; consequently Colonel Montague lay unnoticed for a considerable length of time.

Beyond the bridge, toward San Antonio, for a long distance, the country was heavily timbered, plantations being scattered on either side, with extensive fields of cotton and corn; and wagon-trains either encamped on the eastern edge of the town, or crossed the bridge early that they might get beyond the plantations to the west. Hence, not a soul crossed the bridge for full half an hour after the colonel met with the accident which has been recorded.

The first man who did reach it was a ranchero, who had eaten his supper at the hotel and then, after replenishing his whisky-bottle and lighting his corn-cob pipe, had mounted and spurred west toward his home, beyond the plantations in the great stock district.

It was then nearly dark, but the moon had arisen in the east, casting its bright beams directly up the road; the side of the bridge where the colonel lay, however, being in deep shadow.

When, however, the ranchero reached the middle of the bridge, walking his horse as the law required, the animal got scent of and discovered the prostrate form of the colonel, and sheered to one side so suddenly and unexpectedly as to nearly unseat the ranchero, good horseman though he was.

With a muttered curse the rider drove spurs, forcing his horse toward the object that had frightened the beast—an act always practiced by those who ride habitually, to teach the animal, if such is the case, that it has been frightened at nothing; and thus to prevent, as far as possible, the horse from being easily startled or scared in the future.

But the horse of the Texan had scented human blood, and could not be forced within six feet of the prostrate form, but stood trembling in every limb, regardless of spur and threat.

The rider soon saw, however, that his steed had occasion for fright; and he sprung at once to the bridge-planking, detaching the lariat from his saddle-horn, and holding the slack as he strode toward the prostrate man—not a little amazed at finding a man lying there on the bridge at such a time.

Stooping down, the ranchero, as his eyes became accustomed to the shade, saw the white and deathlike face of Colonel Montague, whom he knew and recognized; and also saw that the colonel was bleeding from a wound on the head, the blood having run over his brow and face, and through his long white hair.

A hasty examination, however, proved to the ranchero, that the colonel was not dangerously injured, as well as the probable manner in which he had been hurt; and he quickly drew his bottle of whisky from his saddle-bags—his horse being somewhat recovered from its fright—and poured some of the liquor over the head, and into the mouth of the senseless man; all the time muttering ejaculations of wonder.

Soon Colonel Montague betrayed signs of recovery, his muscles twitching, and heavy sighs bursting from his breast, followed by deep groans; then his eyes opened, gazing, with a strange stare, up into the face of the ranchero, evidently far from, as yet, comprehending the situation.

"Dog-goned ef I hain't right glad ter see yer comin' 'roun', all hunk ag'in, curnil!" said the ranchero, with relief. "What, in thunderation, hes bin ther difficult wi' yer? Did yer boss gi'n a sheer hyer, and sling yer ag'in' ther planks?"

The words of the friendly questioner seemed not to be heard; or, if so, not comprehended by the yet dazed and demoralized colonel, who still maintained the same stare; this caused the ranchero to judge that the fall had injured the poor man's mind, and he therefore decided to go for assistance.

With this object in view, the ranchero proceeded to place Colonel Montague in the same position in which he had found him; but, if the old man did not comprehend matters, he did nevertheless recognize the scent of the liquor, which he craved with an insane longing. He

sprung, at once, to a sitting posture, grasped the bottle, and gluing it to his lips, took a long and deep draught.

Fearing that the colonel was drinking more than was good for him, the ranchero clutched his bottle, in an endeavor to get possession of it; but the frenzied man held it in an iron grip.

With the cunning, almost of insanity, he arose at once to his feet, bottle in hand; for the first time discovering that he was on the bridge.

The liquor somewhat cleared his mind; and, as he gazed over the guard upon the raging waters, the sight that had last met his view—Pinto, the pony of his darling Marietta, fully caparisoned, and floating upon the mad torrent, dead—was reproduced, or recalled to his mind. Then, with a yell of mortal anguish and most dread apprehension, the colonel sprung, in one wild bound, upon the horse of the ranchero, drove deep his spurs, and the affrighted animal, with loud snorts, darted from the bridge; twitching its owner, who strove to hold fast to the neck-rope, flat upon the planking of the bridge. There he lay, cursing like a pirate, as he watched his horse plunging off at terrific speed into the timber, up the Guadalupe, from the west end of the bridge, toward the Montague plantation.

On dashed the colonel, driving deep his spurs at every bound of the stolen steed; giving not a thought to the man, who kindly sought to minister to him, and whom he was thus so wretchedly repaying for his kindness.

He thought only of that terrible sight, which he had seen in the raging torrent; and which seemed to him an almost positive proof that his idolized daughter, his only child—all that he had to love and cherish on earth—had been swallowed up in the merciless waters of the Guadalupe!

"Oh, my God! My God!"

Thus cried the now nearly demented man, from the very depths of his soul.

"Oh, my daughter! My Marietta! Wealth, self-respect, child—all gone! Oh, God in Heaven! Hast Thou forsaken me?"

And it was not strange, taking into consideration the state of the colonel's mind, and by his losses, his self-condemnation, and the effects of the liquor—thus doubly demoralized, after his long absence—it was not strange that despair, most dark, and deep, and deathlike, oppressed him; when he was forced to believe that even his daughter—his "one ewe lamb"—the only love and consolation of his life, had fallen a victim to the relentless flood!

It was, rather, most strange that he retained sense and reason sufficient to hasten homeward, to ascertain beyond all doubt, that his Marietta's sweet song, joyous laughter, and loving kiss were but things of the past, and which he should know on earth no more.

However, the colonel was now more like a madman than his own true self; and every bound of his horse lessened the clearness of his brain; the avalanche of misfortune and anguish which had been hurled upon him, and had engulfed him, being once more all forced upon his mind, as he bounded from the bridge into the shades of the timber.

It overwhelmed him utterly, causing him to utter groans of anguish, to clench his fists, grind his teeth, and beat the air, in insane agony of soul.

Thus, on went Maurice Montague, madly; spurring deep, as if to vent his unendurable torture of mind upon the horse; shooting through dark shades and moonlit patches, and tearing, at times, through thickets, in his wild course, when the trail led around them.

Thus on he dashed, toward his once happy and peaceful home; fully believing that it was home no longer, and could never more be—that henceforth there was no home for him on earth, that his only peace lay in the grave!

CHAPTER XXV.

A TRAGEDY OF ERRORS.

JIM, the body-servant of Colonel Montague—in fact, the only adult male slave left on the place, although none there were as yet aware of this—busied himself attending to the wants of Harold, whom he conducted to a chamber, where he could get himself up rather more presentably.

Wishing to prevent the probability of any unpleasantness occurring, our hero, after bathing his face and brushing his hair, proceeded at once to the cabin of Aunt Huldry, who

bustled around to afford him every opportunity of drying his clothing.

By persistent questioning, the old negress gained from Harold the whole truth in regard to Marietta's having been carried down the Guadalupe by the flood.

Harold questioned Jim with reference to his having observed any suspicious characters about the grounds, or any sign of a Mexican; but neither he nor any of the house servants had seen any one.

The slaves at the cabins, filled with great anxiety as time passed, kept little Pomp, whose sole duty had been to attend to Pinto, running back and forth to the kitchen, with all manner of inquiries, until at last Aunt Huldly got out of all patience, and told the youthful dorky to:

"Skin out ter de gin-house, an' talk ter Mars' Medders 'bout de fiel' han's, fer pity's sake!"

It was some little time before Harold Holmes was perfectly dry, and feeling like himself again. Then he sauntered down to the ford, ascertaining that the river had fallen to its natural depth, previous to the bursting of the water-spout, and was now quite muddy at the approaches to the ford.

Returning, he strode along the garden paths, gazing with admiration at the well-laid-out grounds, and concluding that Montague plantation was indeed a fit abode for even the angelic being whom he found there, and whose fate seemed so strangely riveted to his own.

Soon he was standing, with folded arms, upon the veranda, admiring the vista from that point, and all unconscious that Marietta had joined him there, and was looking up at him, with every expression of pride and admiration in her beautiful face.

And well she might so look, for he was all that was graceful, manly, and Apollo-like in form and carriage. For herself, words cannot describe the loveliness of her face and figure, which were simply perfection; the excitement under which she had been since Harold was under the same roof with her, having caused her eyes to beam with joy, as of old.

It was happiness in itself to have him at her home, standing by her door, his feet treading the same floor over which hers had tripped for years.

Thus thought Marietta Montague. Only for a fitting moment did the young girl stand, gazing at Harold, when she saw him start quickly, and drop his hands to the weapons at his belt, while he bent forward.

Marietta sprung to his side at once, and clasped her hands around his right arm, gazing up into his face as she exclaimed:

"What is it that you hear, Harold? I hope that nothing serious is about to happen. Surely we have undergone enough of late, to have a respite from anything except joy and happiness."

"I heartily agree with you, Marie darling," said the young man. "As to my having heard anything alarming, I may say that I fancied I heard the galloping of a horse at terrific speed, and accompanied by strange yells. But it may have been much more distant than I imagined."

"I have been pondering over the unaccountable appearance of that Mexican, and of what might have been his motive in seeking our lives; and I confess I never was more puzzled in my life, and that is saying considerable—Hark, what is that?"

As Harold spoke, a most unearthly chorus of howls and lamentations peculiar to the negroes when some calamity has come upon them, sounded from the direction of the line of cabins, and Marietta clung more closely to Harold's arm, shuddering.

"My poor child!" he exclaimed, placing his arm about her waist as he spoke, "you have passed through so much of terror and deadly danger of late, that it is not strange you are nervous and apprehensive at little things."

"Some one of the servants has met with an accident, I presume. Do, please, go back into the parlor, and I will step out and ascertain the cause of this tumult—it cannot be anything more—"

Harold was here interrupted by the rush and bound of a human form through and over the flowers and shrubs, approaching from the cabins.

The next moment little Pomp, his great eyes protruding, his teeth chattering, and his

form trembling in the most abject terror, sprung upon the veranda, and fell flat at the very feet of his young mistress.

There he lay, clutching the skirt of her dress in his little chubby black hands, as he darted glances of superstitious horror at the surrounding shades.

"Oh, Pomp!" cried the young lady; "what is the matter? What has occurred to frighten you?"

This she asked in a husky and apprehensive tone.

No answer came.

"Come, come, Pomp!" exclaimed our hero, in a firm and commanding voice; "answer your mistress. Nothing is going to harm you. You are perfectly safe here. Tell us what has so alarmed you, and what has occasioned the tumult at the cabins."

As Harold spoke he raised the little negro to his feet.

Marietta then took the boy's hand, as she also pressed him to answer.

"De ole debbil done come an' tuck all de fiel'-han's off—eberry one!"

Thus replied little Pomp.

"What nonsense are you telling us, boy?" asked Harold, with some severity of manner. "Give us the plain facts. There is no devil around here."

"He done come in de big black cloud, mars'! Pomp bin ter de gin-house an' de fiel's; but dey all am cl'ar done gone!"

"Where is Mr. Meadows?" demanded Marietta, quickly. "I do not understand this."

"Nor I, I am very sure," said Harold.

"De debbil he dun tuck Mars' Medders 'long too," replied Pomp; his round, black head bobbing from side to side, as he shot suspicious glances around him.

Harold and Marietta looked into each other's eyes, in silence and wonder. The wailing cries of the women and children convinced them that another strange event had occurred at Montague Plantation.

But what could it be?

The peculiar outcries of the slaves now seemed to be approaching. They were evidently filled with fear and anguish, and were now on their way, in a body, rushing to the mansion, or to Aunt Huldly, their queen and counselor.

What further might have been the words, or the investigations of Harold, we know not; but, at this moment, a new cause for amazement, and not a little apprehension drew attention to another quarter, beyond the negro cabins, and down the road that led to Victoria.

"There!" exclaimed Harold. "I hear the same sounds that drew my attention a few moments ago."

"Marie, there is a horseman approaching, at a mad gallop; and I judge that the rider is not far removed from a lunatic, by the unnatural yells he utters. Do you not hear him?"

The young girl leaned forward from the veranda, little Pomp, horror-stricken, crawling over the floor, into the hall, and behind the door, where he lay in a heap, trembling and gasping.

Marietta had heard the sounds mentioned by her lover, and the latter well knew this before he asked her the question. He was surprised, therefore, at her further listening, and refraining from giving a reply. This drew his attention to her, in place of gazing south, beyond the cabins of the negroes.

And fortunate for him, it was thus; for, to his intense wonder and apprehension, he saw that the maiden was again ghastly pale, that she trembled from head to foot, was tottering on her feet, gasping for breath, and on the eve of fainting, and falling down the steps of the veranda.

Springing forward, Harold clasped Marietta just in time to prevent her falling; and her head sunk upon his shoulder, her face ghastly, and she as senseless as if stricken by death.

"What, in the fiend's name, is the meaning of all this?"

Harold asked this, in a loud and anxious voice, but there were none to hear or answer. Before the words had fairly left his lips, a very fiend in appearance and actions shot into view, as if conjured up, to answer in person the question of our hero.

The young man stood, as if petrified; the corpse-like Marietta, limp in his arms, and they both on the outer edge of the veranda, in the clear, bright moonlight. Our hero's in-

tention of placing the maiden on a lounge, inside the dwelling, and calling for her attendant, was forgotten, or prevented by the strange and unexpected sight that met his view.

The sights and sounds which so affected him proceeded from Colonel Montague, who, with bare head and long gray hair matted with gore and flying in disorder, came dashing madly toward the house, at every bound filling the night air with terrific yells.

Unguided, the bridle-reins flying, the horse headed directly along the circular drive toward the mansion, eager to reach one of its kind, the black steed of Harold having been brought up to the veranda by Jim, who had ridden it from beyond the Guadalupe.

The howls and wails of the negroes became suddenly hushed, as the fearful yells of the colonel rung through the bend; all, with the latter exception, being silent as death.

Jim alighted from the black horse and crawled, trembling, under the bushes, and thence beneath the veranda.

Like one suddenly turned to stone stood Harold, his eyes fixed upon the maniac horseman—Marie still in his arms—a striking tableau, and one not calculated to lessen the fury of the frantic father upon this strange return to his home.

Almost positive, in his maddened mind, that not only all of his worldly wealth had been wrested from him, but that his only hope, his beautiful daughter, had been swallowed up by the raging waters of the Guadalupe—without hope and longing for the peace of the grave—in this sad state was Colonel Montague when he dashed up in front of his dwelling at frightful speed.

His yells ceased as he saw human forms, and his glaring, bloodshot eyes became fixed upon his daughter and the young man, his mouth agape as he bent forward. The scene corresponded with his past convictions founded upon the discovery of the pony's carcass shooting down the torrent beneath the bridge at Victoria.

His darling had been drowned, but the corpse had been recovered—recovered by a stranger, the same man whom he had seen bound and condemned to death by the rancheros.

This man had asserted, he now recalled, that he had saved Marietta from being trampled to death in the fearful stampede of cattle on the prairie, and he had not believed it, nor interfered to save him from an ignominious death. Now he had secured the corpse of the girl and was holding the same in taunt and derision—in revenge for his not interfering on his behalf.

His daughter had deceived him and had met and probably become infatuated with this stranger.

This must have been the case, else she would have revealed her adventure on the prairie. And then, he remembered, she had not risen to bid him good-by ere he left home.

All these and a hundred more wild thoughts shot through the crazed brain of Colonel Montague in a moment. All his frenzied rage became centered upon the strange young man who held the corpse of his daughter as if to torture him—even more, standing thus boldly upon his own threshold, a trespasser at Montague Plantation.

Not a moment elapsed after these thoughts flew, electric-like, through the mind of the mad colonel when his horse bounded opposite the young pair, our hero and heroine standing in the bright moonlight, as has been described.

Then followed a most agonizing event, had there been witnesses to suffer at the sight; for Colonel Montague jerked a revolver from his belt, cocked it, and pulled trigger in an instant.

As the report of the Colt's navy sounded sharp and loud on the night, echoing and re-echoing in the arches of the timber, the horse ridden by the colonel sprung into the air in affright, throwing its maniac rider heavily to the earth. There he lay outstretched, his bloodstained face contorted into a look of fiendish madness, upturned to the moon!

At the same instant, Harold Holmes fell heavily back upon the floor of the veranda, where he lay as one dead; a little stream of blood running down his pale face and ghastly temple, his sightless eyes fixed and staring!

While, as deathlike as either, Marietta lay upon Harold's breast; her form still encircled by her lover's arm!

The horses, thus released, galloped into the shrubbery, away from the dwelling; and all became once more as silent as death—death seeming to rule at Montague Plantation!

CHAPTER XXVI.

BROUGHT BACK TO LIFE.

ANTONIO, the Mexican, lay for a long time unconscious, from the heavy blow that had been given him by Harold Holmes. When he did, eventually, recover his senses, and recall the events which had placed him in a powerless condition in the dark shades of the Guadalupe—instead of being thankful that his life had been spared, he was filled with the rage of a tiger; being, besides, furious at having failed to earn the thousand pesos he was to receive from Jim and Hank.

He was also incensed against his two employers, who had been too cowardly to seek the life of their enemy themselves; and who, after inciting him to the deed, had taken no notice of his cries for help.

Had they rushed to his aid, as they should have done, both Holmes and the maiden would have been in their power. As it was, they had both escaped, and Antonio was not sorry for it.

But little that had passed between his three employers had escaped the Greaser's notice; and he had planned, in his own mind, to profit largely through his association with them, it mattered little by what means. However, he was, first of all, resolved to have revenge upon the young man who had stabbed, and then bound him; although there seemed little chance for him to free himself, and seek it. The wound in his arm pained him greatly, and he had lost much blood, though the hemorrhage had now ceased.

The Mexican had heard enough to know that Harold was greatly feared by James and Hank; but why this was, he could not imagine.

He was enraged to think that they had left him to his fate and gone on with their plans without him, for he believed that they had done so.

Had he been less impatient in his desire to earn their money and concealed himself in a thicket, he could have easily accomplished the death of Holmes without placing himself in danger.

Long did Antonio lie, pondering and planning, until eventually an idea flashed upon his mind that promised him freedom and revenge.

He knew by the feeling of the thongs about his wrists that they were of buckskin, evidently cut from his own leggings by his captor, and he now perceived that they had become somewhat more loose. This he knew originated from the damp night air, and if he could now roll to a place where the grass was wet with dew, he was positive that by saturating the buckskin strings with the moisture, he could work his wrists free—the loosing of the thongs about his ankles being then easily accomplished.

With this view, the Mexican worked his way to the bank of the depression where he had been left; there he waited to rest, and gaze around, soon discovering a moonlit "open," but a short distance from where he was.

After a laborious half-hour, the Greaser reached the coveted position, and rolled over the rank damp grass until his bonds were thoroughly moistened. Then he strove, with all his strength, to stretch them, and at length success crowned his efforts, and he was free once more.

Creeping down to the water's edge, he bathed and bandaged his wounded arm, and, to his great joy, discovered his knife and sombrero in the bushes, near the scene of the duel.

He now felt like a new man, and confident to take care of himself. So he stole through the undergrowth to the spot where he had left his employers. As the reader knows, these worthies, having accomplished their object, were now hastening away from Montague Plantation with the slaves and cotton.

Antonio found his horse where he had left him; but he did not mount, but led the beast carefully after him, proceeding toward the mansion.

Having lariatied his steed to the limb of a tree he looked across the gardens, and soon caught a fitting view of one riding madly toward the house, soon recognizing him as Colonel Montague.

The Mexican was greatly amazed at this discovery, not having believed it possible for the colonel thus soon to recover and reach home.

On the arrival of the duped man, who, the Greaser knew, had been drugged, the chances were that there would be trouble for Hank and the Wickfords, and Antonio congratulated himself on being no longer connected with them.

But he knew not as yet what to do, and as he puzzled in regard to what would be his next proceeding, the report of the colonel's revolver rung through the timber. He had not, however, the remotest idea of what had been the occasion of the shot, although there seemed no possible reason for the colonel's having fired it, unless he had discovered either of the conspirators about his dwelling.

Antonio made up his mind to investigate, but at the same time, to keep himself secure from discovery; the wound in his arm yet paining him greatly, and reminding him that he could not maintain even a defense, in a hand-to-hand conflict, were he attacked.

The Mexican was anything but a prepossessing object, as he now appeared; being spattered with mud from head to foot, and his right sleeve a mass of gore.

His long, coarse black hair was filled with dead leaves; and the side of his head was fearfully swollen, from the heavy blow that had laid him senseless. Besides these marks of the struggle, his yellow skin was ghastly, from the loss of blood; being in strong contrast to his heavy black brows and mustache. His agony and fury were made more manifest each time he thrust forward his right arm, and bore his weight upon it, from the excessive pain of his wound.

Silently as a serpent, he crawled onward, taking advantage of every clump of shrubbery; and astonished, and not a little suspicious, at the silence that ruled around Montague Plantation.

Soon he espied the two horses, both fully equipped, and not secured; the neck-ropes being attached to the saddle-horns, in coils.

This discovery increased his astonishment.

He faltered not, however, but proceeded toward the mansion. Upon coming near, Antonio saw the prostrate form of Colonel Montague, in front of his home, and directly opposite to the main entrance.

This sight greatly puzzled the Mexican, as well as the silence that reigned at the bend. He was forced now to conclude that the shot, he had heard, had been aimed at the colonel and with good effect.

Who could have fired it? This was a mystery, which the Greaser resolved to clear up; believing that he would learn something in his investigation, that bore upon the business of his recent employers, and perhaps also further his object of revenge.

He had now to cross the open road, in the clear moonlight; but he hesitated not, although he was suspicious that foes might lurk in the shrubbery. As he stole along, through the arrows of moonlight, he distinctly heard the sound of chattering teeth, mingled with low groans and muttered prayers.

These came from poor negro Jim, who lay concealed, under the veranda; his fears doubled by the long silence that had followed the shot, and then the stealthy crawling of the Greaser near him.

Antonio quickly climbed to the flooring of the veranda, where a startling sight met his view.

He had seen Colonel Montague, lying, apparently dead, in the drive; and now, before him, not ten paces away, lay the man—apparently dead also—who had knocked him senseless, and then bound him!

But, the most surprising figure, in the unexpected and astonishing scene, was the beautiful maiden, who was clasped to the breast of Harold Holmes, and both seemingly lifeless!

Silence still reigned. Not a living being was anywhere within view; but the moment that Antonio realized that the man, who had caused him such great suffering, was before him, either senseless or dead, his thirst for revenge drowned all other feelings and considerations. He crawled forward, resolved to ascertain if Harold was really dead, and if not, to stab him to the heart.

The cowardly assassin soon reached the side of the unconscious pair. Quickly placing his hand upon the breast of the maiden, the expression of exultation on his face increased.

He carefully released the arm of Harold from about her waist, holding his knife between his teeth, while his eyes darted glances in all directions, suspicious of interruption in his dastard work.

An instant's inspection proved that the young man was but stunned by the bullet; the shot he had heard being thus explained to Antonio, forcing him to decide that Harold was deemed, by the colonel, an enemy; which, in the face of the rescue of his daughter from the flood, was another mystery beyond his power to solve.

The Mexican had, however, quickly formed a plan to avenge himself, not only upon his old employers, who had left him in the lurch, but to satisfy himself—as far as keeping his oath of vengeance—by killing Harold Holmes. His plan was to abduct Marietta, after he had first plunged his knife into the heart of her lover.

No sooner had Antonio removed Marietta, than he stepped over the body of our hero, clutched his knife from between his teeth, in his left hand, and raised the long, keen, glittering blade above the broad breast of Harold Holmes; holding it thus poised, feeding his triumph, and fiendish thirst for revenge.

He almost decided to remain thus, and await the recovery of his victim; and then, gaze into his dazed eyes, as he plunged the fatal steel into his vitals.

Recalling his recent struggle for life with the man who was now in his power, the Greaser, however, abandoned this half-formed intention, raised the knife a trifle higher, and then gathered his strength for a desperate death-stab. But, at the very instant that the blade had started on its errand of murder, the sharp crack of a revolver again broke the silence of the bend; the knife of Antonio, struck by the bullet, flew from his grasp, and struck the floor of the veranda with a ringing clang, while blood started from the hand that had held the weapon—two of the fingers hanging, dangling, by a portion of the flesh!

With a fearful, far-ringing yell of mingled agony, terror, and baffled rage, the Mexican sprung to his feet; but instantly realized that, although baffled in one direction with a desperate death-stab. But, at the very instant that the blade had started on its errand of murder, the sharp crack of a revolver again broke the silence of the bend; the knife of Antonio, struck by the bullet, flew from his grasp, and struck the floor of the veranda with a ringing clang, while blood started from the hand that had held the weapon—two of the fingers hanging, dangling, by a portion of the flesh!

The villain was confident, and with good reason, that whoever had wounded him would not dare risk another shot lest they might hit the maiden.

Harold Holmes was—by the shot, the tramping of the Mexican upon him, and the yell of the latter—brought partially back to his senses.

With much difficulty he gained a sitting posture, and then, as in a dream, saw Antonio upon his own black steed, dashing through the gardens toward the ford; Marietta, his darling clutched to the breast of the Mexican, her head hanging over the miscreant's arm, her hair flying over the back of the horse, and her face—so fair and pale—upturned to the silvery moonlight.

This was for a moment only. Then the Mexican, maiden, and mustang shot into the dense dark shades of the Guadalupe.

With a groan of mortal anguish Harold Holmes staggered to his feet, just as a stranger—a Texan—darted to his side, revolver in hand.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ON THE TRAIL.

"In Heaven's name, who are you, sir? Am I dreaming, or am I going insane?"

Thus cried out Harold Holmes, pressing his hands to his forehead, his manner and words proving that he was too bewildered to rightly comprehend the situation, while yet he was conscious that something terrible had happened.

The scene that he had just witnessed was, to him, more a blurred vision of his imagination than a reality; yet his surroundings, and a slowly-returning realization of the near past, made that vision already too real for his peace of mind.

"I can but repeat your words, sir," returned the stranger, who stood with leveled revolver pointed at Harold. "In Heaven's name, who

are you? I find Colonel Montague stretched out before his own home, dead for all I know; and you, with his daughter in your arms, lying senseless upon the veranda. Then I see a Mexican bending over you, his knife raised to plunge into your heart.

"I shoot the weapon from the Greaser's hand—his fingers with it, I reckon—and then he catches up Miss Marietta, and makes his escape on horseback; the animal being in the garden fully equipped.

"I have been prevented from sending a ball into his vile carcass through fear of shooting my employer's daughter. I regret now that I did not kill him in the first place.

"You are a stranger here, the colonel seems to be dead, and his daughter has been stolen. I do not know whether you are an enemy to this house, or a friend. What does it all mean? Has the world turned upside down?

"Come! Who are you, sir? Give an account of yourself! My name is Mart Meadows. I am the overseer of Colonel Montague; or at least, I was until a couple of hours ago."

Harold Holmes reeled like a drunken man.

As Meadows ended, he burst out, repudiating the questions that had been put to him:

"Why did I not plunge my knife into the miscreant's heart? I might have done it. She, my darling, in his power, and on my own fleet steed! Oh, God protect you, Marie!

"But I'll save her—I swear it!—and the vile dastard, who has profaned her with his touch, shall die the death of a dog!"

Perceiving that the man before him had not yet recovered his natural balance of mind, and that he seemed to be anything but a stranger to Miss Montague, Meadows now sprung down upon the drive, to satisfy himself as to whether the colonel was dead, or merely senseless.

He detected, in a moment, that his old employer was neither dead, nor seriously hurt, and then seeing a bottle protruding from his pocket, he started back with it to the veranda, and placing it in Harold's hand, said:

"Here, sir! Take a drink of this, and it will revive and strengthen you. Then try and recall the late occurrences here, and see if you can explain your presence, and tell who you are. Steps must be taken at once to pursue that Greaser, and rescue Miss Montague.

"I am convinced that he is not alone in the business, but that a party of men have plotted the ruin of the colonel, and thus far they have succeeded in their villainous work.

"Let me say again, that I am the overseer for Colonel Montague. I have a right here, and I intend to look into this mysterious business, and see justice done, if it costs me my life."

Harold took the bottle, and swallowed some of the whisky, while he listened to Meadows.

The liquor had the effect of clearing his brain, and enabling him to recall the past only too vividly.

He extended his hand as the overseer ended, saying quickly, and in great excitement:

"Mr. Meadows, I am glad, more than glad, to meet you! I believe what you say, and that you are a friend of this unfortunate gentleman, now unconscious, and of his fair daughter.

"My brain is clearer now, thank Heaven! Let me say, briefly, in explanation of my presence here, that I am Harold Holmes, and a friend of Miss Montague. I was fortunate enough to save her from the flood this evening; but a villainous-looking Mexican attempted our lives later in the bottom-timber. I fought him—a knife combat—but as Miss Montague was present, I did not kill him, only knocked him senseless, bound him, and left him there.

"I then escorted the young lady home and she changed her garments. I dried my clothes at the kitchen-fire and dispatched the colonel's body servant over the river for my horse—a noble black—and then returned to the veranda, where I was joined by Miss Montague.

"While here I heard the approach of the colonel. He rode up yelling and apparently frantic, and Miss Montague fainted. I caught her in my arms. Just then her father dashed up, and before I could decide what to do he raised a revolver. I saw the flash and remember no more.

"He must have shot me, for the track of the bullet is on my head. As for the Mexican, it is evident that he got free, and, burning for revenge, sought me here. You know all the rest. Did I understand you to say that you shot the knife from the Greaser as he was about to murder me?"

"I did, Mr. Holmes. You had a close call, and a desperate character that Greaser has proved himself, having carried away Miss Montague, notwithstanding his wounded condition.

"However, I am inclined to think he will not proceed far, having probably lost much blood, by the appearance of his face as I saw it in the moonlight. He will not dare take the open prairie beyond the river, and he is, no doubt, at the present time hiding in the bottom.

"We must rouse the negroes. By the way, where, in the name of wonder, are they?"

"All frightened and in hiding, I presume," returned Harold. "But I do not believe you have a horse that has the speed and endurance of mine. Curse that Mexican miscreant! He shall not ride him for any length of time.

"I feel better, Mr. Meadows, and can join you. What is to be done with the colonel? He is insane now, and will be worse if he should know that his daughter has been abducted. He must have been maddened by drink, although his daughter told me that he has long abstained from it, even in moderation."

"You are right, I believe," agreed Meadows, "and Miss Marietta must have known he had been drinking again when she heard his fearful yells. It was that which caused her to faint.

"But you don't know all. The field-hands are gone, and I presume the entire season's cotton-crop. Two men brought me a letter, written by Colonel Montague, at Indianola, ordering me to deliver the slaves and cotton to them.

"I believed it to be all straight, and had started for San Antonio, on business of my own, when the colonel galloped past me like a madman between here and Victoria. I knew then that these men had victimized him. He would not notice me, though I called out to him."

"That accounts for the shooting, then," exclaimed Harold quickly. "I saved Miss Montague a couple of days ago from being trampled by a stampede of cattle. I shot a score of them, and the owners were about to hang me, when I explained to them why it was that I had shot their stock. The colonel met us, and he was called upon to verify my statement.

"His daughter had not told him of it, and he said that he disbelieved my story. The rancheros were about to string me up, when I was saved by Miss Montague herself. Coming up this evening, insane with liquor, the colonel must have supposed that it was the corpse of his daughter that I held, and connected me in some way with her death. Hence the shot, and what followed."

"I honestly believe," said the overseer, "that Colonel Montague was lured to Indianola by villains who knew his weak point, drugged and robbed him. Leaving him there, they tried to get possession of his cotton and negroes before his return. That Greaser must be one of the party.

"Perhaps the same men employed him to abduct Miss Montague. We can trail the wagons easy, and the Mexican will, no doubt, join them, if my surmises are correct. It is evident that a plot has been formed to ruin the colonel, and the motive is as much revenge as profit, otherwise his daughter would not have been molested. They have put their heads in a lariat noose, whoever they are—that's certain!

"Seat yourself, Mr. Holmes, until I rouse the negroes. Then we will get out the best horses, and do what can be done to rescue Miss Marietta. I'll have the colonel taken to his room, and bound to his bed before he recovers, or he will cause more trouble."

The slaves of all ages, led by Aunt Huldj, soon emerged from the cabins, and Meadows explained, in a few words, the secret of the absence of the field-hands and the unfortunate condition of the colonel, well knowing that the superstitious fears of the negroes would make them useless unless everything was explained to them.

Colonel Montague was conveyed to his room by Jim and some of the women, and secured to the bed—several being left to watch him and supply him with a reasonable amount of liquor, that he might not become worse instead of better.

Two of the best horses were made ready, and leaving Jim and Aunt Huldj in charge of the premises—the former having been armed

and directed to shoot all intruders—Harold and Meadows, after the wound of the former had been attended to, spurred over the ford, examining the exit, which, from the overflow, showed plainly in the mud the out-going foot-prints of Harold's black steed, upon which they knew now rode the dastardly Mexican assassin with his captive, Marietta Montague!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A TEMPORARY TRIUMPH.

THE elder Wickford, on leaving Montague plantation, had given the wagon-master to understand that he had reasons for proceeding in as secret a manner as possible; and that he would pay well for all the time that might be passed in delays that he judged necessary. He explained all this, by stating that he had won cotton and negroes at cards; and, as Colonel Montague was on a spree, caused by his losses, the latter might, as he was a violent-tempered man, seek to make trouble.

Card playing was a ruling passion among planters, at the time of which we write; and frequently a score of slaves were staked upon the issue of a game, and even hundreds of bales of cotton; consequently, nothing strange was thought of the transaction between the pseudo Mr. Wales and Colonel Montague, by the wagon-master.

Victoria was passed through after the denizens of that town had consigned themselves to the care of Morpheus; and the train proceeded on some distance from the suburbs, then leaving the road, and striking out over the plain in a circling course, until they again headed up the Guadalupe, but on the opposite side from their starting-point, Montague Plantation.

Keeping out on the plain, secure from view from the river, the train rolled on, until directly northeast of the little ford, to which allusion has so frequently been made, when the leading wagon was turned westerly, toward a belt of timber, that marked the course of a branch of the Guadalupe.

Upon reaching this creek, the train went into camp; the mules being divested of harness, and turned loose beyond the timber, on the prairie, there to feed, while the teamsters rolled themselves in their blankets for sleep, as did also the wagon-master.

James Wickford, who had procured some bacon and corn bread from one of the teamsters, distributed it to the negroes, who devoured the food with ravenous appetites, notwithstanding their great distress at being torn from their cabin homes.

They had all been dumfounded at learning that they had been sold. They could not be made to believe that it was true; as their master had reserved them, at his big sale on the Colorado, five years previous, and had assured them often, that they should never be parted from their families, as long as he lived.

Not only this, but Marietta, their young mistress, and whom they all idolized, had promised them, in nearly the same words, that they should never be sold.

They, therefore, believed that there must be some mistake—a terrible mistake—that even the overseer had not been able to understand; and they were confident that their old master would return, overtake the train, and demand them back.

Negroes, even plantation hands, were quite good judges of human nature, ignorant though they were in other matters; and this is not strange, when we consider that a small child, or even a dog, will generally watch a villain, with suspicious eye.

The slaves had, from the first, decided that Hank and the "Wales" men were bad; and upon this they built their hopes of again being restored to their homes, as they felt that fraud had been made use of, to gain possession of them, and of the cotton.

They all had known of the erratic actions of their master, in the long ago; and, had they seen him, as he was, when galloping up to his house, shortly after their departure, they would have decided that he had been playing cards, as of old, when drunk, and had lost them in that manner.

All things considered, it was well for them that they had not seen their old master in his sad plight; for they composed themselves to sleep, with the hope of returning to their homes the following day.

When all was quiet in the camp, the Wickfords and Hank sauntered to the southern extremity of the line of wagons, at such a dis-

tance as to prevent being overheard when conversing with each other.

Their minds were now too excited for sleep. They began to realize that their very lives were in jeopardy; that, did the colonel return, having his senses about him, he would at once organize a pursuing party.

They had noticed, as they crossed the bridge at Victoria, that the Guadalupe had fallen to its usual depth; hence, they knew that the ford at Montague Plantation was open, and as easy to cross as ever.

This fact caused them to proceed to a point on the border of the timber of the creek, that would command a view of the bend and ford, although the same was a considerable distance off.

If any horseman should approach from that direction, he could easily be distinguished on the plain, in the clear moonlight.

As the trio were confident that no one on the south side of the Guadalupe could possibly have any suspicions that a train of wagons had reached, and encamped at the creek to the north, they had no fears of being discovered by accident.

Any pursuers would, at once, naturally suppose that the wagon-train had gone on toward the Gulf.

The object of the plotters had been, to do all in their power, to cause any who might pursue them, to believe that they had taken the road to Indianola or Lavaca; and they consequently began to believe themselves to be perfectly safe.

"By St. Iago!" exclaimed Hank, with strongly-expressed relief and satisfaction. "Here we are, where we can talk freely at last. Everything has gone smoothly, and we made the rifle, just as you planned it, with perfect ease; although I was a little dubious of results, at one time. And you, Jim—hanged if you weren't about as blue as a hen with the pip!"

"That was when Antonio, as you believed, gave that terrible yell—was it not?" asked the elder Wickford, as they seated themselves on a fallen tree, in a weary and listless manner.

"Yes, and I presume you are satisfied that it was the Greaser, as he has not turned up," returned Hank, producing a flask of brandy, which he passed to his companions.

"I am inclined to think that it was," agreed James; "and I am greatly puzzled to make out what kind of a scrape he got into. Have you any explanation of the affair that you can arrive at?"

Wickford gave Hank a touch of caution as he asked the question, he having instructed his pard to say nothing in the hearing of Will, in regard to their having discovered Harold Holmes, as the son knew nothing of his father's having defrauded the children of his old friend of their fortune—in fact, Will knew but little about them.

"I reckon," replied Hank, "that, as he went to ascertain if the girl was drowned, cutting across the bend, as we directed, that he must have discovered her, clinging to a limb or bush; and, in endeavoring to assist her, lost his balance, and fell into the flood himself. That would account for his yell, and it is the only way in which I can account for it. His not returning goes strongly to prove something of the kind."

"Well, we have made a big stake, and you ought to be satisfied with the avalanche of misery that you and the freshet have brought upon Montague."

"But I am not satisfied, Hank Hodge," said James, furiously; "and I shall not be, as long as old Montague walks the earth. No amount of wretchedness, such as we have seen, will ever be satisfactory to me! All I say is, curse the Guadalupe, if the river has stolen from me the best part of my revenge, as I fear it has."

"By Heavens! The more I think of it, the more I wish that you could have added the girl to your list of victims. It would be revenge, indeed, could I have the colonel in my power, and be able to taunt him with my having delivered his beautiful and only child up to one of my pards, a noted libertine!"

"When I had enjoyed his agony, occasioned by that, then I could have killed him with right good-will, and comfort myself with having kept my oath."

"Do you really believe that the young lady we saw was the colonel's daughter, and that she was in the ford, and was washed down the Guadalupe?"

Will Wickford, who had not previously taken part in the conversation, now put these questions.

Neither of the others spoke for a moment; Hank not knowing what answer to make. James at length broke the silence.

"There is no doubt, Will, that the girl was the daughter of Montague. I noticed the resemblance to her mother. As to her being in the ford, both Hank and myself, after your departure, went to the margin of the timber, and saw her and the pony swept down by the torrent. There is little doubt that she was drowned."

"I regret it exceedingly, as it curtails my chances to thoroughly avenge myself."

"Why did you not make an effort, then, to save her?" asked the young man, quickly.

"There was not the slightest chance of saving her. It would have been madness to have attempted it," was the reply of his father.

"But, I say, Will, you seem to take quite an interest in the girl, judging from your words and manner; and, now I recall it, you left us rather reluctantly, when I sent you to look for the wagon-camp."

"I feared she would meet death by the flood, and I wished to warn her, if not too late; and make an effort to save her, if she was washed into the torrent."

Will said this as if he meant every word of it.

"You wanted her to live, in order that my revenge might be more overwhelming—didn't you, Will?"

"Well," said the young man, slowly, "I did not think at the time, on that part of the subject; except, that if she was to be made a victim, I wouldn't object to being the prime mover in the plot, and to take her off Hank's hands. That is all."

"She took my fancy, from the first glimpse I got of her, and I confess that I regret exceedingly, if she has met the fate you seem to believe."

Hank burst out into a low, sneering laugh; but the father of the speaker seemed suspicious and indignant, as he returned, in a loud tone:

"You don't mean to say, Will Wickford, that you would prefer to have the plan carried out as Hank first suggested; namely, that you should marry the girl, under a false name, secure her fortune, and then let her slide?"

"I admit," was the answer, "that such a plan of revenge would have just suited me. It would be a confounded sight more agreeable than galloping around the country, at the risk of getting a bullet through one, or a rope around one's neck, losing one's sleep, and traveling half-dead for want of water, or bothering with a crazy man, as we have. I've concluded that we were fools, not to have finished the colonel, while we were on Chocolate Creek."

"Then, we were bigger fools, when we permitted the girl to pass us, as she went towards the ford. We could have raked her in with the niggers and cotton, and swept the board clean."

"Then, after she had found out that the old man was dead, I could have gotten on the soft side of her, and secured the plantation for myself."

"By thunder, Will!" said Hank, excitedly; "I half believe that you would forget the revenge part of the plot, after you got settled down."

"I shall never forget that, Hank; you may rest assured of that," said Will. "But, there is no use of talking of it now, as the girl is dead, beyond a doubt."

There could be no mistake in judging by the words and manner of Will Wickford, as he last spoke, what his genuine sentiments were; and whatever suspicions Hank and the elder Wickford might have entertained, were banished quickly; for they saw that Will really believed that the maiden was dead.

"The question is," said James, "repudiating all previous talk—where is the colonel? If he got over the effects of that drug by sunrise, or even by the middle of the forenoon, he would reach home to-night, if he killed the horse in the attempt. You bet your life he would."

"That is, if he had any recollection of what occurred to him at Indianola. He would conclude that he had been the victim of a plot, and would make all haste to return to Montague Plantation; fearing that we would get away with his property before he reached there."

"I'd gamble heavy that he's home now!" said Hank, emphatically.

"And if he is," said Jim, "he is the most miserable, and the most tortured man on earth! Cotton, niggers, and daughter, gone! Put that down. I regret that our safety prevented my leaving a note at his house for him, informing him that I yet live, and have not forgotten my oath—that I have delayed my revenge, but that, at the proper time, I have brought a load of misery upon him, and that more is to come; that his time is short in this world."

At this instant, the trio sprung to their feet, as one man, and peered between the branches, down the moonlit stream.

A black horse was bounding madly along the line of timber, upon the back of which was a deathly pale, but most lovely girl.

"By all the fiends!" cried out Hank Hodge; "stop that horse, boys! Don't you see it's the colonel's daughter, and gliding right into our arms?"

"The Guadalupe was considerate, after all, and did not steal your revenge, Jim Wickford!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

KILLING HER CAPTOR.

THE information brought by little Pomp to his young mistress, that the overseer and field-hands were absent from the plantation, was puzzling to her; but this was dropped from her mind, as the sounds of the approaching horseman attracted her attention; this time quite plain and most startling, giving her much apprehension and alarm.

Only for a moment did she listen, when a sickening dread seemed to overpower her.

Well she knew the origin of those sounds; although more than five years had passed since she had last heard them.

She remembered when her loved father, after a protracted spree, during which he had lost many of his slaves and much money, had returned to his home, spurring his horse at terrific speed, uttering wild and insane yells; and that he was a very madman, having to be secured, to prevent him from doing bodily harm to those who came near him—each one of whom he imagined to be one James Wickford, who had nearly ruined him, having drugged him, and then cheated him at cards. That was the last time.

Marietta knew that the sounds, which she now heard, were the same as in that sad long-ago, and that they came from the same source.

Instantly, the thought that her father had been lured to Indianola for a bad purpose, became a conviction to her mind.

At all events, he was now returning home, crazed with liquor, and filled with mad fury, and would act as he had in former days.

Meadows and the field-hands were gone she knew not whither; and there was no one there to attend to the furious and irresponsible man.

No one except Harold Holmes.

Marietta trembled with the intensity of her horror and anguish at the but too well-known sounds; and, as Harold's presence was thought of, in connection with controlling her father, her brain began to whirl; for she feared that the colonel, upon seeing Harold, would shoot him where he stood.

Then, as has been recorded, the poor girl fainted and fell into the arms of her lover, before Colonel Montague had even come into view.

When Marietta regained consciousness she came very near relapsing into insensibility at the horror of her position, for she found herself in the embrace of the hideous Mexican who had attempted to cut loose the roots of the tree upon which Harold and herself had been supported after they had escaped from the flood.

There could be no mistake. It was the same cowardly wretch, with the same fearfully swollen face—the result of the blow Harold had given him.

No sooner did poor Marietta fully realize her position than she became sick and filled with almost hopeless despair.

She could not, for her life, understand how she had become a captive to the Mexican, whom she knew that Harold had bound fast, and she now strove to recall the circumstances connected with her return from the bottom-timber to her home.

Then she recollected having fainted on the veranda; and, as she recalled the fact that her

father had returned, maddened with liquor, her despair was increased.

She knew that he had not come within view when she had fainted, and that Harold was near her at the time. What had followed she would not dare even try to conjecture. The Mexican had in some manner gotten loose, slain her father, and probably also her lover, and then escaped, carrying her with him!

Marietta now caught a glimpse of the head of the horse, and knew that they were mounted upon the noble black steed that belonged to Harold Holmes.

She had last seen this horse when Harold had ridden down toward the ford and sprung from his saddle to rescue her from the raging waters; and this caused her to conclude that she must have been for a long time unconscious, during which much that was terrible must have occurred.

Desperate and hopeless as seemed her position she felt that, did she know that her father and Harold were still living—that they had not met as enemies, and one been slain by the other, the survivor falling by the knife of the fiendish Mexican—did she know that these very reasonable suspicions of hers were false, she would be greatly relieved, and feel some hope of being rescued from the yellow skinned miscreant.

She began to believe that her life was sought for some inexplicable reason by some unknown persons, who had bribed this assassin in their service.

She recalled the story told her by Harold, and decided that the man upon whose track he was, had discovered him instead: that he had found out that Harold loved her and had, therefore, hired the Mexican to abduct her—thinking that the young man would by this means be drawn from his purpose of revenge and seek to find and rescue her at all hazards, thus giving the murderer an opportunity to escape, and cover his tracks.

But a very short time elapsed after Marietta regained her consciousness, when she resolved to crush down her feelings of apprehension and terror as much as was possible, and strive to ascertain in what direction her captor was conveying her; but all she could determine on was the fact that they were going at full speed along the margin of a line of timber—probably the bottom-land of the Guadalupe—but, whether their course was up or down the river, she could not decide.

She could see, however, that a moonlit open plain extended beyond them, to the right of their course.

At length the Greaser—who, up to this time, had paid but little attention to his captive—gave a fiendish laugh, as he caught the gaze of the poor girl fixed upon his hideous face in horror and aversion; then he cried out:

"You see and know me, *senorita*! I hope you remember me. We have met before, and now we part no more except in death!

"Look on my face, and see the mark of your cursed lover's fist. He stabbed me, and then struck me—I, Antonio Garcia!

"But I am avenged. Did he think to escape me? Your father, Colonel Montague—do you hear me, *senorita*?—your father shot the *Senor Holmes* and then fell dead himself from his horse at his own door. Ha! ha!"

The fiend laughed aloud and continued:

"Don't be so fast! You think your father killed him; but I'll not be robbed of my revenge, even in thought. I found him on the veranda, lying like a dead man and with you in his arms. But he was not dead; and I laughed as I drew my knife.

"I had not forgotten who had stabbed me and bound me like a dog—not I, Antonio Garcia! Do you hear me, *senorita*? Or, are you dead, like the others?"

No answer came from the cold white lips of the poor girl, who lay on the miscreant's shoulder.

Her eyes were glassy and fixed in a stare of horror upon the face of the Mexican, proving that she retained her senses, and was suffering such torture as to deaden the brain.

"Do you hear, *senorita*? I plunged my knife to his heart—the heart of your lover!"

"Then I unwound his arms from about you, and then some coward from the gardens shot at me. Look! *caramba*, look!"—holding up his maimed and bleeding right hand. "But I eluded you, and mounting your lover's horse, I escaped; and here we are! Look in my face and say that the blow is not avenged.

"I, Antonio Garcia, helped to drug your

father at Indianola, and there he lost his money and slaves and cotton at cards. All that crazed him, and he returned home. You know the rest now.

"Look at me, and you see one who helped to ruin your father, who killed your lover, and who will make you his slave—his plaything—for a moon, and then you too shall die! A Garcia's revenge is deep, and follows quick after the cause."

For a moment after these words had been hissed from the lips of the Mexican the maiden lay powerless.

Then came a reaction. She began to fully comprehend the dread import of the dastard's speech, and then all her strength returned. In fact, she seemed for the moment endowed with the strength and undaunted daring of a female Hercules. Her whole being shrunk from contact with the vile snake, who held her. She became changed to a perfect fury, and gifted with an energy and a dexterity that were simply astonishing.

Like a flash of light, she threw herself from the thigh of the Mexican, directly upon the broad horn; clutching the mane of the fast-flying horse in her left hand. At the same instant she jerked with her right the knife from the belt of her captor, and with the quickness of thought plunged it into his breast.

Then, drawing it out, and through the air, with cut, and thrust, and slash at his hands and arms, as, with horrible yells, he strove to ward off her mad blows with his wounded arm and mutilated hand.

This was for a moment only. The lightning-like play of steel before his eyes was terrible and appalling, and as the blood welled from his breast, Antonio Garcia fell backward over the hams of the black steed, with a yell of mortal agony and deathly dread, striking upon the earth with a dull and sickening thud!

And on, with snorts of terror, darted the fast horse of Harold Holmes, our heroine now clutching at the horn and cantle of the saddle, one foot in the stirrup that had just been emptied and she gazing back with her eyes still fixed upon the silent form of the Mexican outstretched on the sward beneath the pale moon.

Her face was like that of a corpse, her long hair flew wild, and the bloody knife which she believed had been used to murder her lover, and with which she had stabbed his assassin and her own abductor, still clutched in her hand.

Thus, like an avenging fury of the night—most unlike herself, most unnatural, and most vengeful in appearance and expression, and yet, with the deep stamp of black despair upon her beautiful face—thus on, dashed Marietta Montague, on the fast steed of the man of all men to her, but whom she now believed to be dead, and her father as well!

CHAPTER XXX.

IN THE HANDS OF THE PHILISTINES.

THE three villains, when they espied the fair rider clinging to the saddle, felt confident that she was the daughter of Colonel Montague.

On the impulse of the moment they all sprung forward.

Both Hank and James caught the horse by the bit, one on either side, while Will sprung to prevent the maiden from being dashed to the earth.

Marietta at once concluded that these, who thus came to her relief, must be honorable gentlemen, although their presence at such a wild spot, and on foot, was strange and rather unaccountable.

"Thank Heaven!" she exclaimed. "I do not believe I could have kept my saddle a moment longer. Ten thousand thanks, gentlemen!"

As she spoke, Will Wickford assisted her with care to the ground. Then he stood looking at her, in wide-mouthed admiration.

Worldly and crime-hardened men as were Jim and Hank, they were both greatly affected by the remarkable beauty, both in face and form, of the maiden before them; but they forgot not for a moment, their hazardous position.

Hank spoke immediately, and to the point, as he led the horse toward the timber, forgetting not that the emergency of the case in hand demanded new cognomens for the Wickfords, as the colonel's daughter would

probably know of the letter that had been written over the name of Wales.

"Mr. Thompson," said Hank, emphasizing the name in a peculiar manner, "please lead the lady at once into the timber. I infer that she has enemies in pursuit, and we must be prepared for them."

"There are no enemies pursuing me," said Marietta, as she advanced into the shades; "but I have had a most terrible adventure, which I will explain as soon as I have somewhat recovered myself. My home cannot be far from here. I am the daughter of Colonel Montague."

"Well, blast my eyes!" said Hank, in a low voice to James; if this isn't luck, I don't know what luck is. She's the prettiest piece of female humanity I ever laid my eyes upon!"

"I don't know what you call luck," said Jim; "I think we're in a mighty bad fix. If we take her along, we've got to slip the train, and go it alone. How in the fiend's name did she happen this way, at this time of night?"

"Ask me something easier, Jim! However, I reckon she'll give us the whole biz, and as she has no idea who we are, we'll be able to get points, and to form opinions as to what is to be done. You bet, Will is getting posted already.

"Come on! Hanged if I ain't interested. I thought sure that some one was after her, and I still believe there has been, but she has eluded them."

Without any further comments both proceeded to rejoin Will and the maiden who had so strangely fallen into their power.

As they came up they found the girl seated upon a dead log, her face buried in her hands, and her form trembling violently. Will was seated some feet from her, and was looking at her in speechless wonder.

The trio exchanged significant glances.

At length, by a great effort of will, Marietta recovered herself, and addressed her supposed friends.

"I must tell my story," she said, "in as few words as possible. This past evening, I was swept down the Guadalupe, by a terrible freshet, and was rescued by a young gentleman, who had once before saved my life. His name is Harold Holmes!"

The two elder villains shook in their very boots, at the mention of the young man's name.

"He succeeded in lifting me upon a fallen tree, that projected into the stream; and, while there, our lives were threatened by a cowardly Mexican. Mr. Holmes conveyed me to the bank; and, after a struggle with the wretch, stabbed him, then knocked him senseless, and bound him. There we left him, and hastened to my home.

"There, Mr. Holmes and I were standing on the veranda, when my father, who has been to Indianola for a day or two, and who has not drank any liquor for years, rode up at terrific speed, and making loud and fearful outcries. Although I did not see my poor father, I was aware that he was crazed with strong drink, and I was so weak as to faint away.

"When next I became conscious, I found myself in the arms of the same hideous Mexican, who had attempted our lives, and who, as I have said, had been left bound by Mr. Holmes.

"My captor was mounted upon the horse from which you, gentlemen, have just rescued me, and we were going at headlong speed. I was dazed with terror, and could not recall the near past.

"However, I was not left long in ignorance of what had happened, for the horrid wretch gave me the story in his own fearful manner.

"He said that he was Antonio Garcia. That he had escaped, and had witnessed my father's return. That Mr. Holmes, as I had feared, had been shot by my poor father, in his madness; but that the bullet did not kill him, merely glancing across his skull, and thus stunning him. The fiend then said that he crawled upon the veranda, found Mr. Holmes and myself both senseless, and that he plunged his knife in the young man's heart. Oh, my God!" exclaimed the poor girl; "I can go no further!"

With a cry that would have melted a heart of iron, poor Marietta burst into spasmodic sobbing. Her agony of mind was so overwhelming, that she took no notice of the strange actions of her auditors; for, as she proclaimed the death of Harold Holmes, the

trio sprung to their feet, being hardly able to repress a cry of exultation. The recital had ended in the unbounded relief of James Wickford, at the death of the only man on earth whom he feared.

The same feelings almost overpowered Hank, and Will also, for they now realized that the very probable death of Colonel Montague had not only placed them in a safe position, in regard to their recent outrageous plot against him, preventing investigation and pursuit; but would, also, place the beautiful daughter in their power, utterly helpless and unprotected.

The miscreants clasped the hands of each other, in the semi-darkness, and exchanged grips of congratulation; still, however, they were much interested, if not concerned, in regard to the fate of their worthy confederate, Antonio Garcia.

All were anxious for Marietta to proceed; yet they feared to accost her in sympathy, or in protestations of friendship and assistance, lest they might betray in their voices the joy they felt.

Perhaps the silence they maintained, caused the poor girl to continue much sooner; for this silence, in those dense shades, was very impressive, and would have been considered strange and suspicious had not the maiden been governed by the deep emotions, that tortured her with their fearful intensity. But, seeming to exert a powerful effort of will, and repressing her choking sobs, our heroine continued:

"You can judge somewhat, gentlemen, my horror and dread, as my fiendish captor, with exultant and jeering voice and manner, revealed what I have just told you. I had been quite incapable of motion, but when the brute went on, stating that he had avenged the blow and stab that had been given him by Mr. Holmes, and further, that he had been connected with a plot to lure my father to Indianola—which was accomplished; my poor father being drugged, made insane with whisky, and then cheated out of much of his property at cards—when he closed this vaunting recital, every word of which shot like lightning through my brain, the miscreant vowed that he had ruined my father, driven him to his death, murdered my rescuer, and would make me his cringing slave!

"Then, I seemed to become endowed with a superhuman strength. I sprung upward, caught his knife, grasped the mane of the horse with one hand, and plunged the *cuchillo* into his breast. I repeated the stabs, until he fell to the earth!"

"Did you kill him? Is the fiend dead?"

These were the questions of James Wickford and his son.

"He had been twice wounded previously. I do not think it possible he is now alive. The horse brought me quickly from the spot, where I left him, outstretched and motionless, as he had fallen. I realized then, all at once, that my strength was leaving me.

"But my heart is broken, and my brain is bursting!" cried the poor girl, in anguish.

"Oh, Father in Heaven pity me! Give me the strength to gain my home—home, I fear, no longer. Then, if that wretch's story be really true, there is nothing for me but to die!"

"Miss Montague," said Hank quickly, "you are too young and beautiful to die, and I think your extreme grief uncalled for; for I do not believe the Greaser spoke a word of truth, when relating that boasting story of his."

The young girl started to her feet, and tottered toward Hank, crying out:

"Oh, bless you for those words! You give me hope, and I pray that your belief may be true.

"But what object could the fiend have had in concocting such a chain of falsehoods? and why, if my father still lives, was the wretch permitted to carry me away? But can you guide me back? Do you know where Montague Plantation lies?"

"Yes, Miss Montague," replied Hank; "and if you will only try and compose yourself, I and my friends will confer in regard to conducting you thither. From my heart I congratulate you on your escape. You are a heroine, in every sense of the word. Now do, pray, be seated!

"Come, pards! We will change the horses to fresh grass, and then see what we can best and soonest do to relieve this young lady's mind."

"Oh, thank you, gentlemen—thank you! May God ever bless you!" exclaimed poor

Marietta, as she sunk again upon the fallen tree, where she had seated herself at the first, covering her face with her hands, and thus remaining in silent prayer for strength and courage.

And the three merciless villains retired still deeper into the wood, to study up the case in its present bearings and concoct a plan to plunge the wronged and suffering girl into a misery and degradation, to which her present condition was as nothing could they but accomplish their base ends.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A SURE CLEW.

ALTHOUGH almost unfit, from the injury he had received, to venture on the trail of Marietta's abductor that night, Harold Holmes was determined. Habit and a strange instinct, born of following many such for the past two years, now came into play, and he joined the overseer at once.

To search the thickets for any distance would not only be absurd but next to impossible; and Meadows and Harold were agreed in this, and rode off without delay. Upon reaching the bend, our hero bent his searching gaze up the river, the margin of which was for a long distance in view, and he discovered a black object dart across a small moonlit space, caused by a break in the timber. At once Harold was convinced that he had seen his own horse, upon which was the dastard, whom he had foolishly refrained from killing, and his own injured and darling Marietta.

"Spur on, Meadows!" he yelled, waving his hand; "we are on the right track! I have caught a sight of the yellow devil. I know it is my own horse—no other could fly like it—besides the time and distance point to our game.

"By Heavens, he shall not escape me this time!"

The overseer gave an outcry of joy, and they sped on up the margin of the Guadalupe timber.

The horses they bestrode were fine animals, fresh from the stables of Montague Plantation, and our two friends made rapid speed.

Thus on they rode, without exchanging a word, Harold being in the lead, when suddenly the horse of the latter, sprung with a snort of terror, into the air, but to the left of his course; shying from a small thicket, beneath the moss-draped branches, and beyond the main timber line.

Had not Harold been an excellent horseman, he would have fallen to the ground. As it was, he retained his seat, and instantly drew his revolver.

"In the name of wonder!" exclaimed Meadows, as he spurred forward, "what has startled your horse?"

He had scarcely spoken, when his own steed started, in the same wild and strange manner.

Just then, a voice that was hardly human, broke harshly upon the ears of both.

"Don't shoot! I know you are brave, senors, and my enemies, but don't shoot me. I am dying! *Caramba!* I am cut to pieces!"

As the Mexican thus spoke, he writhed like a snake, and rolled into a patch of moonlight.

He was a fearful sight!

Both of the pursuers were thunderstruck, as well as filled with aversion and horror, at the terrible spectacle. It was only momentary, however. Harold sprung from his horse, casting his bridle-rein to Meadows, and advanced.

"Speak!" he said, "you miserable coward, assassin, and abductor! What have you done with Miss Montague? Where is she? Speak! or, by Heavens, you shall die a thousand deaths!"

"Don't shoot, senor!" gasped the miscreant. "The senorita is safe. Look! She stabbed me with my own knife"—pointing to his bleeding breast—"I am cut to pieces by her and you.

"I know not where she is. She galloped away. The horse is a *diablo*. *Caramba!* I am tortured!"

Harold glanced at the overseer in wonder, before he again spoke to the Mexican:

"How do we know that you are speaking the truth? The poor young lady may have been killed in her struggle for life, you vile wretch!"

"I swear by all the saints she is free!" groaned Antonio. "Where she is, I know not. Think you I would allow that horse to escape me?"

"Curses on the cowards who got me into

this scrap! But I will be avenged. Antonio Garcia will tell all, if you will not kill me!"

Harold bent upon one knee, and demanded:

"What do you mean? Who inveigled you into this business? Speak, and prove your words, or we'll hang you to the limb above your head!"

"I will tell! I will tell!" gasped out the wretch. "It is revenge that I want now. I was hired, in Indianola, by three Americanos, who wrote to the Colonel Montague to come to them, and buy cotton. He came, and I lassoed him, on Chocolate Creek. They gave him drugs when he was senseless, and then shut him up in a room with liquor to drink. Then they got him to play.

"They won his money, and his slaves and cotton; and then left him, dead drunk, on Chocolate Creek.

"Then they came to the Guadalupe to secure the negroes and cotton. I crossed the ford with them, just before the flood came; and we saw the senorita go into the ford. They sent me to kill you, if the flood did not drown you.

"You know the rest. I was to get a thousand pesos if I killed you, but you got the best of me."

"They sought my life, you say?"

"Yes. And they are on the Guadalupe now."

"Who are these men?" demanded our hero.

"Senor Wickford and his son, and Hank Hodge."

Harold started at the name of Wickford.

"Wickford, you said? And the other?"

"Hank Hodge he is now, senor; but when I first knew him he was called Crooked Comstock."

"At last! at last!" These words burst from Harold, in his wild excitement. "Thank Heaven, I am close upon him! Now I understand the strange promptings that kept me on the Guadalupe!"

Then turning to the overseer, he said:

"Mr. Meadows, where do you think those infamous plotters are now? Have you any idea which way the wagons went? I am glad that you mentioned having met them; your suspicions have proved correct. They are my most deadly enemies, as well as of the colonel."

"The infernal cheats and demons must be still lurking on the Guadalupe!" was the reply.

"I do not believe they would dare put on toward the coast. I am with you in the hunt for them, Mr. Holmes. My duty to my employer binds me to the utmost exertion in recovering his property, if forgery has been done.

"But we have them at our mercy, as wagons travel slowly; and it seems to me that we ought to search for Miss Montague."

"You are right," returned Harold. "For one moment only, I allowed my thirst for revenge to rule my mind to the exclusion of everything else.

"We will push onward, for I know she cannot have passed down the river; and that horse of mine is full of fire. Frightened as the animal must have been, when that brave and desperate girl daringly released herself from her captor, she could not have easily, or at once, controlled him.

"Now, Senor Antonio Garcia"—sarcastically and with every expression of loathing—"we will leave you to enjoy the little life that remains to you as best you may.

"But I will be merciful—here is my canteen of water. Compose yourself until our return from investigating the truth of your story in some points. Much of it, I know, must be true, as otherwise you would not have known of some of the circumstances you have mentioned.

"We may need you as a witness, and if so, may consider that guileless nature of yours, and may possibly give you a chance to linger on awhile in this life if you desire it.

"But I presume your usefulness in your present honorable calling of a paid assassin is at an end. You will, I have no doubt, think twice before again entering into a plot against the lives and property of those who never harmed you—indeed, of people whom you have never seen. We shall see.

"Come, Meadows. The word is 'levant,' and at full speed at that. A year—yes, ten years of my life—to get a glance at my black steed and his precious burden."

With these words our hero sprung into his saddle, after having first passed his canteen to the miserable wretch who lay on the ground covered with gore, and mutilated.

The wretched Greaser, with profuse thanks, although uttered in an agony that was almost unbearable, grasped the canteen and drank with mad eagerness, as Holmes and Meadows galloped away at headlong speed and unconsciously following the very trail that had been taken by Marietta, although the judgment of the searchers was all that was to govern them.

In fifteen minutes afterward the two horsemen sped directly past the bowed form of the fair girl for whom they were searching, she being seated within the timber weeping alone, the trio of conspirators having just left her while they plotted further. She, altogether unconscious of the fact that her lover was alive—more than that, near her—and he equally ignorant of her presence.

So it is frequently in the many changes and chances of this life.

The Wickfords and Hank, however, heard the fast-galloping steeds and peered from their covert in the thick timber.

They then discovered the two equestrians, recognized them, and knew that the avenger was on their trail—an avenger who, as Hank Hodge well knew, had more than sufficient cause to cut him in inch pieces and roast him at the stake. But James Wickford, with all his own dread of meeting with Harold Holmes, was not aware that Hank had any cause to fear him.

As for Will, he knew nothing of him.

There was now at hand a complication of affairs that was calculated to hasten the trio to a disastrous and speedy ending of their trail on the Rio Guadalupe.

CHAPTER XXXII.

FLEEING FOR FREEDOM.

"By St. Iago!" said Hank; "good news pours in thick and fast. Did you ever have things played right into your hand, in such shape, in your life, Jim Wickford?"

"Never!" was the reply. "Though I am cheated of the pleasure of settling old Montague, the death of Holmes takes off the rough edge of my regret."

"What have we to do with Holmes?" asked Will, quickly.

In his excited state, James had forgotten his resolve that Will should not know of his having swindled the orphans out of their property. He had no ready answer for his son; but Hank proceeded, as if he had not heard Will's question:

"There's the colonel, Antonio, and the girl's lover—all dead; Meadows has gone to San Antonio, and the plantation is at our mercy. We can make a big haul in the line of plate and jewelry, besides ready money."

"Then, whoever marries the girl, gets the plantation; and that's no small affair. But, we must get out of here with her, or we'll be in a tight fix. When the tragedy at the plantation becomes known, there will be the devil to pay. And then, that confounded overseer will return. Hang it! Our only show to keep a grip on the girl, is to go back with her."

"But I want to know about this Holmes?" put in Will.

Just then, however, an explanation was made impossible; for the sound of galloping horses was heard approaching, and Hank cried out:

"Hang it! The luck's turned, I believe. Come on, quickly, to the edge of the bush!"

As he spoke, Harold and Meadows rode up rapidly, along the line of timber.

"I told you," said Hank, with a volley of oaths. "That Holmes, I'll confess, is the only man on earth that I'm afraid of. I'm superstitious, and I'll own it. I've dreamed, many a time, that that he was killing me, and I have come to believe he will, some day. But, I'll do my best to escape him. I won't explain, now, what it is that's between us—there isn't time."

"We must get the girl now, and strike for the plantation. It's our only chance. Will, you must remain, and keep the train here until we return."

"Come! We must get our nags, and git at full speed, or hemp will fall in love with our necks."

James Wickford grew as pale as death.

Will was greatly amazed and bewildered, as Hank intended he should be, until they mounted, and led the black steed to Marietta, signifying their intention of conveying her to her home.

James Wickford lingered a little, impressing upon his son the fact that much depended upon the latter, in case the overseer and young Holmes discovered the wagon-train, and made inquiries about the negroes and cotton, or for the colonel's daughter. He assured his son that all would be well; that the train was to proceed, under the latter's direction, while he and Hank would convey the girl, by an untraveled route, to Colorado, promising Will that he should have Marietta, regardless of what Hank might wish.

Hank and Jim were now very anxious to know if Antonio was really dead; for, if he was not, and the horsemen, who had just ridden past, had discovered him, he had doubtless betrayed them.

With this in mind, Hank asked, before starting:

"Miss Montague, did you keep on the border of the timber, from the time you freed yourself from the Mexican until you joined us?"

Poor Marietta seemed not to hear the question, so terribly affected was she still, by what had passed.

So filled was her mind with the dread happenings of the near past, that she gave little thought to the men whom she had met in so isolated a place; which at any other time, would have aroused a suspicion in her mind, in regard to their character, as they were neither *vaqueros* nor teamsters.

Hank was obliged to repeat his question.

Slowly the maiden turned her head, and gazed at her questioner, for the first time observing his features in the moonlight; and, even occupied as was her mind, a shudder convulsed her frame, as she encountered his gloating gaze.

At once, she became suspicious that her conductors might not be honorable gentlemen, and that again she was in peril; much being now recalled, that tended to confirm her suspicions.

From her recent experiences, she was led to be apprehensive of danger, and with good grounds.

However, she wisely resolved that these two men should not, by her manner or words, imagine that she doubted their motives.

She recalled the circumstance, that Harold had asserted that few horses could equal his favorite in speed and endurance; and she believed that she could escape from these men, did they show, by any movement or words, that they were not conducting her to Montague Plantation.

"We are, I believe," she answered, "returning in the same course that I pursued, and, if I do not mistake, this is a branch of the Guadalupe."

"I have often galloped up it on my little pony, that perished in the flood. Yonder line of timber, I am quite sure, marks the course of the river, and we are not far from my home. Do you, gentlemen, know where we are?"

"Yes," said Hank, "you are correct. That is the Guadalupe ahead. But that Mexican—where did you escape from the scoundrel?"

"Indeed, I could not say," was the reply; "and if I could, I would not go there for the world! If what he said is true, I feel that I shall go mad."

"Do not borrow trouble," advised Wickford. "You have certainly had more than your share. If that villainous Greaser lives, he ought to be hanged!"

The attention of Marietta was now drawn to the last speaker; and, for the first time, she noticed that he had but one arm. This discovery, at once increased her suspicions; for she knew well, that her father's most bitter enemy had but one arm also. Could this be he?

She had heard her father speak with regret of his duel and its consequences; but, as the man was presumed to be dead, she banished the thought that had troubled her, and replied:

"Oh, do not seek to find the miscreant! Let us hasten; we can save time if we gallop across the plain. I dread to return, and yet if I do not reach my home soon I shall die!"

All now struck out over the moonlit plain, having resolved in their minds that they would search for the Mexican on their return.

The more they thought upon the situation, the more anxious they now became.

Hank and James allowed Marietta to get in advance and guided their horses alongside each other, the former saying quickly:

"We must not go to the house with her, Jim. Keep in the timber and await developments. There will be a chance to steal in and get her, and then by a roundabout course reach a place of safety. There is no such this side of the Guadalupe while that confounded young Holmes is on the hunt."

Barely had the words left the lips of Hank, when James Wickford clutched his arm, pointing toward the north; the latter gasping for breath, his face pallid, and his eyes bulging.

Hank jerked his head around quickly, saying as his eyes became fastened on the point to which James directed him:

"The game's up, Jim, by all the gods! That's Holmes and the overseer, and I believe they have Will a captive. We must cross at the ford now; it is our only course, and—by Heavens!—the girl goes with us. We've lost the niggers and the cotton, dead sure!"

As they glanced directly ahead they next perceived a horseman shoot out from the timber toward them, soon followed by another—thus completely barring their way. Their one chance now, was toward the junction of the creek and river; but as they gazed in that direction, they saw a long line of horsemen galloping up and cutting them off from that point.

"Curses on the luck!" yelled Hank. "We're corraled, Jim. The whole biz is known, or this would not have occurred. Antonio has blowed before kicking the bucket!"

"There's one chance yet!" almost shrieked James Wickford. "Seize the girl, and gallop over the open plain. They dare not shoot if we keep close to the girl."

"You're right, Jim! But there's a poor show for us. Spur for life!"

Marietta discovered the first horseman in front of them, and recognized in him at a glance the form and bearing of her father. The colonel's head was bare, his gray locks were flying in the wind, and he was followed by his body-servant, Jim.

Turning quickly to make known this discovery to her two conductors, she was thunderstruck by their appearance and position. At the same moment, guided by their gaze, she saw the horsemen on the plain, and toward the timber.

Her first impulse was to hasten toward her father, she being so astonished at the sudden appearance of so many men on the late silent prairie, upon which not a living or moving object could be seen a minute before, that she was almost petrified. Then, too, she was filled with apprehension, as even the sight of her father, alive, and hastening to her, seemed to be proof conclusive of her lover's death.

At this moment the two strangers spurred directly toward her.

Their faces were now contorted by terror, rage, and a seeming thirst for revenge.

They were simply fiendish in expression, and meant murder, or worse.

With one wild, despairing cry, Marietta Montague struck the horse with the slack of the reins, and the noble black shot, like an arrow from a bow, over the plain, the affrighted maiden clutching, as before, at the saddlehorn, to retain her seat.

With curses loud and deep, James Wickford and Hank drove spurs, the latter yelling like a demon.

"Kill the colonel this trip, Jim, and see you make no botch of it. The nigger'll run. I'll secure the girl, and we'll cross the ford. We may escape them yet. We'll give them a fright in the timber anyway!"

And on, at terrific speed, went Marietta toward her father, while close after dashed Hank and James, yelling like fiends. Both were now filled with desperate and vengeful resolve—no hope in the rear, and little in their front!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SUN AFTER RAIN.

HANK HODGE was right in his assertion, in regard to the identity of the three horsemen, who dashed toward them from the northwest; although too far away to recognize them by any peculiarity in form or apparel.

Harold Holmes and the overseer had, after passing the weeping Marietta in the shades,

perceived a portion of a wagon-till, through the foliage at a little distance, and rode up to it.

"Who comes there?" yelled a dozen teamsters, springing from their blankets, and cocking their revolvers.

"Friends to all honest men!" was the response. "Where is your wagon-master, boys?"

Thus cried out Harold, and at the same moment the man asked for appeared. The latter, at once, recognized Meadows; he having demanded the name of the wagon-master, and the number of wagons, from Hank and Wickford, at the gin-house, to prove that the order was correct. He then remembered the name.

"I say, Mose Montford," said the overseer; "you've been worked into a bad biz, by those strangers. I believe the order was a forgery, as well as the one for the cotton and negroes."

"Where are the three devils, who engaged you, and who pretend to own the cotton and negroes?" demanded Harold, impatiently. "And have you seen a young lady, on a black horse? I mean Miss Montague. She has been abducted by one of the party."

The wagon-master and the teamsters were astounded; the former exclaiming:

"I don't know where they are, gents! I reckon they're around camp somewhar; an' ef hit's es you say, dog-gone them, they deserve hanging up a limb! Boys, hustle 'round, an' shake them up!"

Just then, Will Wickford stepped boldly from the undergrowth, into the camp.

"Thar's one!" cried out a teamster.

Harold sprung from his horse, revolver in hand, and caught Will by the arm.

"What means this outrage?" demanded young Wickford.

"It means that your game is up, Mr. Wickford, alias Ross, alias Wales—that is, if you have followed your father, in assuming cognomens! Where is he, and where is Hank Holge, alias Crooked Comstock, and where is Miss Montague?"

To say that Will was astonished, would be drawing it mild. He was simply speechless.

This, then, was the man whom Hank and his father so feared; and who, and what, could he be?

"Search the timber, boys!" yelled the wagon master.

"Will you speak, or shall I tie you up, and thrash the truth out of you?" demanded Harold in a fury. "I am a desperate man, and will stand no fooling."

Satisfied that this strange man knew everything, and indignant at having been kept in the dark by Hank and his father, Will Wickford answered:

"Miss Montague returned home, but a short time since—just before you entered the camp."

"And your father? And Hank, as he calls himself?"

"Have gone with her," was the reply. "You ask much, when you force a son to betray his father; and, were I not disgusted with this entire business, I would not have told you, had death been the penalty."

"Come, mount this horse!" commanded our hero. "I must secure you to the saddle. Desperate cases require desperate remedies."

In five minutes more, all were galloping down the river, to cut off Hank and Jim; while Harold and Meadows, with their prisoner, sped over the plain in a quartering—they having discovered their game as they cleared the timber.

At the first glance, our hero saw that the train-men would be of no benefit whatever—that there would be a terrible conflict, before even he could reach the scene of action—and his mental agony was extreme, as he shot over the plain, plying spurs, at every bound of his horse.

When Colonel Montague reached a point near his daughter, he gave a wild outcry of joy; and, by gestures, gave her to understand that she must gallop past him, without stopping. It is doubtful if poor Marietta would have heeded his directions, if she had been able to control her horse; but she was utterly powerless to do more than cling for dear life, to the saddle-born—the horse becoming again frightened at the pursuit and yells.

Another glance showed the maiden, her lover, as he came bounding from the northwest, toward the pair of miscreants, and to the assistance of her father. A more cheering sight could not have been presented to her.

Both of those whom she had believed, with

good reason, to be dead, were alive; but both were now rushing madly toward possible death.

Probably there were never four men, nearing each other at terrific speed, more filled with a murderous longing for revenge, and more resolved to satisfy that longing, than the quartette now in sight.

Hank and James knew that their lives now depended on their dexterity and coolness, as well as the speed and endurance of their horses; but, before the shock came, Hank had begun to realize that there was still very much in his favor.

He knew that the enmity of the colonel was against Wickford, and that his own danger lay in the rear only; so he resolved to spur on, regardless of Colonel Montague, desert his pard, secure Marietta at the ford, and escape with her into the timber.

Thus he would gain both life and revenge.

And, upon this resolve, Hank acted.

The colonel and James Wickford advanced toward each other; murderous hatred in the eyes of each.

Suddenly a spurt of fire flashed from the colonel's revolver, followed by a sounding report; and, with a yell of terror, James fell to the earth—a bullet in his breast!

Maurice Montague brought his steed to a sudden halt, and with a cry of triumph, sprung upon his fallen foe. At the same time, Harold flew past the spot, in hot chase of Hank; Marietta being now near the timber, and heading for the entrance to the ford, the noble black seeming to know what was required of him, without even a twitch of the rein.

Fast after her rode the miscreant, his face filled with desperate determination and fiendish triumph.

Down into the ford dashed the black horse, the girl feeling that she was near safety; but hardly had the steed reached the middle of the stream, when Hank Hodge spurred madly after, forcing his animal by a thrust of his bowie to bound forward.

So eager and intent upon capturing the maiden before she reached her home, where he might meet resistance, was the wretch, that he gave no heed to what was behind him; and just as he reached to gather the shrieking Marietta in his vile grasp, the lasso of Harold cut the air, the noose falling over Hank's shoulders and tightening quickly, binding his arms to his side.

The next instant a bullet from Harold's revolver pierced the ham of the miscreant's horse, and Hank Hodge was jerked over into the river.

Spurring his horse to the side of his recovered steed, Harold and Marietta gazed again into each other's eyes, their hands met, but neither of them was able to speak from deep emotion.

The horse ridden by our hero trembled with the efforts to sustain itself, and the hard dragging body of Hank at the end of the lasso.

The rush of waters caused much commotion, and Harold pointed at once to the opposite bank.

Marietta quickly urged the black steed over, and her lover followed, dragging the foiled wretch through the current, and soon reached the bank with his now senseless captive. Binding him hand and foot Harold rushed up to the mammoth tree where, seated at her favorite place, was Marietta, the noble black steed standing near.

Fast through the ford, riding a horse and leading another, upon which James Wickford was lashed, came the colonel, his face expressing excessive exultation; while directly in his rear, with the captive Will Wickford—he, too, securely bound—rode Meadows. Bringing up the rear came the wagon-master and teamsters, Antonio Garcia in their midst, supported upon a horse by a Texan riding upon either side of him.

The Mexican presented a sight that was most horrible to look upon; his face swollen and bruised, his clothing torn and smeared with blood and dirt from head to foot.

The features of the Greaser were drawn with agony, which he strove to crush in his vengeful fury, as his black, snake-like eyes shot glances of hate toward Hank and James Wickford.

"Come, my darling; this is no place for you," said Harold to Marietta. "Allow me to conduct you to your home. Let us hope that the dread and startling dangers and sad ex-

periences, that have tortured you for some days and nights past, will never again be yours, but henceforth only happiness.

"The clouds are breaking, and I venture to prophesy a joyous future. All's well that ends well!"

Still clinging to her preserver, the fair girl trembling with excess of joy proceeded directly to the mansion; there to be welcomed by Aunt Huldry and the other house-servants, as well as all from the cabins—the latter all in tears, and still bewailing the absence of their husbands and fathers, besides being filled with superstitious terrors at the strange occurrences for which they could not account.

Harold immediately transferred his precious charge to the care of Aunt Huldry and her maid, and then, in a few words, informed the negroes that the missing field-hands would soon be again with them, that all were safe and near at hand.

He then returned to the ford amid the clamorous thanks of the negroes and many cries of:

"De good Lordy bress dat young marster!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

GRINDING EXCEEDING SMALL.

WHEN Harold Holmes reached the old retreat beneath the huge tree at the ford a strange scene presented itself.

There was quite a clear space beneath the branches around the projecting roots, and within this space were congregated the train-men, and the colonel, with Meadows and the captives.

James Wickford, Will and Hank were bound to trees, and Antonio reclined upon a blanket that was spread upon the ground.

Black despair and abject terror contorted the features of Jim and Hank, while Will seemed to be greatly amazed and apprehensive at the sudden and unexpected change in the face of affairs. He, however, apparently doubted if their captors would proceed to extremities with them.

When Colonel Montague perceived Harold approaching he advanced to meet him, extending his hand and saying cordially and with great warmth:

"Mr. Holmes, I have learned much in a few minutes, from friends here, in regard to the remarkable and repeated services you have rendered to me and mine, and which I returned, in my ignorance, by attempting your life.

"I escaped from my servants and started in pursuit of the inhuman monster who has been the curse of my life, and who has been, partly, at least, foiled in his infamous scheme to ruin me.

"You have saved the life of my child for the third time, and I presume, I have much to learn of your daring bravery in her service.

"Permit me now to say, with every expression of heartfelt gratitude, that I am proud of your acquaintance, and shall be of your friendship. We have much to do here, that justice demands should be promptly and adequately settled."

"Colonel Montague," returned the young man, with deep feeling, "I am more than pleased to have your good-will and friendship, which, I assure you, I prize above that of any other man. I have much to say to you; but as you remark, this is a time for prompt measures with those demons.

"I will tell my story to all, and call upon that Mexican to reveal the cowardly plot in which he was an actor. We have sufficient testimony to rid the earth of two of the most depraved villains that ever cursed God's earth. I recommend the younger Wickford to mercy, for he has been throughout the tool of his dastardly and unprincipled father."

The colonel then called the men to order, and began by requesting that Harold should tell them what he knew of the character of the accused men.

"I beg," said the young man, bowing to Colonel Montague, "that all other evidence may be brought forward first."

"Certainly," was the reply; "if you so desire it."

"Caramba! Senors, look at me, Antonio Garcia, all cut to pieces!" shrieked the Mexican. "Curses on the American *diablos*, who got me into this scrape, and then deserted me!"

The Greaser then gave a detailed account of his having been employed by Hank and James Wickford—the latter as well as his son, assuming the name of Wales—to assist them in

capturing and ruining Colonel Montague. He gave the full particulars of the plot. Also that he was bribed to kill Harold Holmes by them; Hank being as eager for the death of Holmes, as had been Jim. Antonio made, in short, a full confession.

Through it all, the prisoners maintained silence.

The colonel then related his sad story; producing the letter that had been used to lure him to Indianola, and narrating the principal circumstances of his life, previous to his duel with Wickford, and his removal to the Guadalupe.

Then followed the testimony of Meadows, the overseer; who produced the order and bills of sale, all of which were forgeries.

Curses and angry threats broke from the wagon-train men, on all sides; and loud cries of:

"Hang the cowards!"

But all the evidence, that had been heard, was as nothing, when compared with the straightforward narrative of Harold Holmes, which followed.

Even Will Wickford was dumfounded, and filled with shame and fury against his own father, as the perfidy of the latter was fully made known to him; but when Harold, with words that shot through the brains of the captives, related the fiendish plot of James Wickford, to dispose of poor Hortense—which plot had been taken advantage of by Hank, then known as Crooked Comstock—then a yell arose from all the assembly, that caused the festoons of Spanish moss, over their heads, to tremble like aspen-leaves.

This tumult subsided, and all again became as still as death, none offering to touch the captives as they recognized the fact that the two fearfully wronged men were the ones to pronounce a fitting verdict.

At this moment, when James and Hank braced themselves and assumed a look of defiance, Antonio struggled to his feet—a horrible object to look upon—and gasping for breath, his black eyes flaming, yet fixed upon his recent employers in intense hate, as he cried out in a hoarse screech:

"*Diablos Americanos!* Curses on you; I am cut to pieces—I, Antonio Garcia!"

As the Mexican screamed this out, he clutched wildly at his throat, his eyes rolled upward, a gurgling sound escaped his throat, blood spurted from his mouth and nostrils, and he fell, with a sickening sound, upon the blanket—a hideous, revolting corpse!

"Will some of you men remove that body?" requested Harold, in a low tone.

He was promptly obeyed.

Colonel Montague then said: "We will adjourn to the plain beyond the river to carry out our programme; for, coward and miscreant as is James Wickford, he shall have a chance for his life!"

"I will fight him with revolvers, at ten paces; using my left hand, my right being bound."

"And, as I have sworn to avenge my murdered sister," put in Harold, "nothing but the life of Crooked Comstock will satisfy me!"

Notwithstanding that all the others wished to hang the wretches instant, in fifteen minutes afterward, Maurice Montague and James Wickford stood, facing each other, at ten paces, revolvers in hand; Will Wickford having been left on the opposite side of the river, and bound to a tree.

"I shall not let you off this time, Jim Wickford," said the colonel, calmly. "You are not fit to live, or to die; but, die you must, to put an end to your crimes!"

Knowing that he would be slain, hanged like a dog by the crowd, if he killed his adversary, James Wickford trembled in abject terror for a moment. Then, as if he had, all at once, brought the full strength of his will to bear, he braced himself, and fired quickly, before the word had been given.

The bullet flew wild, and the next instant James Wickford fell pierced through the brain; Hank being forced to witness the death of his companion in crime.

"Cut that demon's hands loose, and give him a knife!" cried out Harold, in a stern, and commanding voice; his features white as death, with fury and hatred.

Hank was released from his bonds and a knife placed in his hands; but he threw the weapon, with terrific velocity, at our hero, yelling out, as he jerked a pair of small Der-ringers from a side pocket.

"Curse you, Harold Holmes! You shall not have the satisfaction of killing me!"

At the same moment, and before the words were entirely spoken, he fired at Harold. Then, placing the remaining pistol at his temple, he pulled the trigger. A yell of triumph ended in his death, as he fell forward upon the prairie sward, his brains bespattering the grass and flowers.

Luckily, the quick eye of Harold detected the movement of his antagonist when throwing the knife; and he bent low, thus avoiding the weapon. Then, before he had gained an upright position, the bullet flew over his head.

All this transpired in a moment's time, and there was no chance for any one to spring upon Hank, before the latter lay dead; but the pair of miscreants were beyond all power to do future crimes, and all were satisfied.

Harold, indeed, felt relieved; for he had not been obliged to stain his hands in blood—his feelings, in this respect, having been somewhat changed, since his meeting with Marie Montague.

The dead were left where they fell, for the night, and all returned across the ford, there ascertaining, to their astonishment, that Will Wickford had disappeared.

None, however, were disappointed, as all had agreed to set the young man free, influenced thus by Harold, in the presence of Will, which had seemed to cause a great change in the latter.

A teamster was at once ordered to ride to the wagon-camp, and order the return of the negroes to their wives and children, and Aunt Huld, together with her assistants, was put on extra duty, as Colonel Montague invited all hands to celebrate the events of the night—the recovery of his daughter being, of course, first in his mind—by a most sumptuous supper.

The colonel made arrangements with the wagon-master to keep on to Indianola with his cotton, and there deliver the same to his commission merchant.

But another surprise greeted Colonel Montague, and to Harold it was even more so, which was a communication from Marietta, to the effect that Will Wickford had been to the mansion since his escape, and had left a package for the colonel, as well as a statement and papers for Harold—some of which he had hastily penned before departing, as he, asserted, to Mexico, there to live a new life and never to return.

The parcel, upon being opened by the colonel, was found to contain all the money he had taken with him to Indianola, to invest with the self-styled Wyman Wales, and which he had lost at cards.

Harold's papers proved to be an assignment of all property, personal and otherwise, including plantation and slaves on the Colorado, to our hero. With this, was a statement that he was satisfied the same had been purchased by his father, with funds intrusted to the latter for Harold and Hortense Holmes.

He added, that doubtless a statement would be found, among his father's papers, which would prove everything to be as thus asserted.

There was no little rejoicing at this, and more especially on the part of Colonel Montague.

The old gentleman had already begun to feel quite a paternal interest in our hero; having now learned all the particulars of the daring rescues of Marietta.

Instead of being angry, he was greatly rejoiced at their mutual confessions of attachment to each other.

It is needful only that we say further, that before the waters of the Guadalupe had begun again to rush with fury, occasioned by the autumn rains up-country, Harold Holmes and Marietta Montague were united in the bonds of holy matrimony; the ceremony being performed in the shades, beneath the festoons of moss, that draped the branches of the mammoth tree at the ford, on the same spot where the happy pair, after their exciting adventure at the stampede, confessed their undying love for each other.

And long lived Colonel Montague, to enjoy the happiness of seeing his children happy, and their little ones blessed his old age by their love and devotion—he keeping, until death, his second solemn resolve, never to drink or game again.

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